

Loose Id

Anne Cain



NOON

Pawprints

# PAWPRINTS

Anne Cain

Loose Id.®

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# Loowis



The Loose Id

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## Chapter One

“Hey, come here and check this out.”

Adrian set down the bag of chow on the floor where he knelt. “Be right there,” he called over his shoulder. Turning back to the row of kennels, he popped open the one before him. “Here you go, fella.”

A large Lab mix trotted over, wagging its tail and covering Adrian’s hands in a flurry of wet licks. “Okay, I love you, too.” Adrian chuckled and rubbed the cheerful dog behind one of its floppy, golden ears while he slipped in the dish of chow. The Lab got started on dinner, and Adrian closed up the stall as he stood.

Pausing a minute to wash at the sink beside the doorway, Adrian dried his hands on some paper towels and headed into the next room. “What’s up?”

On weekends, he and Marty were the only volunteers manning the animal shelter after hours. The small facility housed a wide assortment of critters from turtles to ferrets, not to mention the usual mix of stray dogs and cats. Since this was a no-kill shelter, the small facility was full to capacity more often than not. And then some.

Adrian tried to guess what unusual guest the shelter had acquired during the day. Since they'd seen it all, including baby alligators, he figured it had to be something really special to wow Marty.

"What've you got?" Adrian found his friend peering into a tall wire cage reserved for birds. "Someone brought in another eagle?"

"No, I think it's a talking parrot." Marty pursed his lips at the cage. Inside, a vivid green parrot with a crown of red feathers stared back at him from its perch. It shook out its feathers and cawed benignly. The bird sure looked pretty, but didn't seem too willing to talk.

"Come on, baby," Marty coaxed the parrot. "Say something for the doc."

The parrot cocked its head at them and cawed again in response.

Adrian chuckled. "That sounded like, 'Why is this guy making goofy faces at me instead of putting some bird feed in the cage?'"

"Ha, ha." Rolling his eyes, Marty snorted. "I'm telling you, he can talk."

"It's definitely a gorgeous parrot." Adrian picked out a canister of feed from one of the cabinets on the opposite side of the room and served some in a dish. As he hooked the dish on the inside of the cage with the bird, he sighed. "Hard to believe so many beautiful animals end up without a home."

Marty brushed a few loose strands of his chin-length auburn hair away from his eyes. "Tell me about it," he agreed sadly. "Look at this one."

He pulled Adrian toward another row of kennels. Compact and locked into the wall with metal tabs, these carriers were used both to transport and temporarily house smaller animals like cats or rabbits. Each cubbyhole-sized pen housed a guest, of course. The one at the end of the last row had a yellow tag knotted through the wire bars -- a warning about the current occupant.

Crouching down to get a better view, Adrian rested an elbow on his knee. Scrunched all the way against the back wall and in a corner, a long-haired cat lay curled in a ball. It

raised its head at the sight of Adrian, and a pair of crystal blue, glowing eyes stared out with fear, round and alert. Most of its fur appeared to be white, with two patches of glossy black fur starting at the cat's elegantly high cheekbones and sweeping back to cover its head and shoulders. A tiny pink triangle, dwarfed in proportion to those big, bright eyes, formed its nose.

"Isn't that one something?" Marty squatted beside Adrian. "Just look at those eyes."

"Wow," Adrian had to agree. "I can't tell what breed he might be, but he's beautiful."

"You know, my building does allow pets..." Marty tapped the side of his chin.

"Don't rub it in," Adrian sighed. "But forget it. The owners are going to come looking for this runaway. I would."

He moved closer to the kennel and rested one hand on the latch. "Hi there," Adrian said, keeping his voice low and soothing.

The cat pricked its ears forward, but otherwise remained perfectly still. Something around its neck glittered, a thin, silver chain that looked almost like some kind of choker collar. The tufts of fur around the band made it hard to tell exactly what it was.

"Uh, what are you doing?" Marty said in a warning tone as Adrian popped the latch open. "The yellow tag is there for a reason."

"This little guy can't be a biter," he assured Marty.

"Believe it," Marty nudged Adrian. "The catcher who brought this cat in along with a few other strays was covered in scratches. Hell, I almost got nipped while trying to cage this one."

"So do you know the cat's sex?" Adrian asked.

"Not really," Marty let out a sheepish chuckle. "I didn't get a chance to check earlier."

Adrian rolled his eyes at his friend.

"Hey, I love animals same as you, Doctor Ferrer," Marty poked him in the side. "But I don't want to get scratched up for next weekend."

“So you and James are heading down to the Keys after all?” Adrian grinned. His smile faltered when Marty’s expression soured. “Or not...”

“We’re booked for the trip, but I don’t know.” Marty shrugged. “The whole thing feels so up in the air.”

“It’s hard to get away sometimes,” Adrian offered consolingly. “And James said the firm has been picking up clients left and right.”

“He’s busy, I realize that.” Marty shrugged again, a gesture he used whenever he wanted the conversation to end. “It’s fine.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.” Adrian nudged his old roommate’s shoulder. For the past six months, Marty had been seeing James, and the relationship showed no sign of cooling off. Their careers were in tune, with James a lawyer and Marty a courtroom clerk, they liked the same music and movies, and the sex was supposedly great. Just because their schedules didn’t line up for a weekend getaway didn’t mean trouble darkened the horizon for the two partners.

After six years of loneliness peppered with the occasional hollow dating experience that never led to anything even remotely resembling a relationship, Adrian knew something good when he saw it. “The two of you were made to keep each other happy,” Adrian said quietly. “Nothing’s ever going to change that, Marty.”

“You’re a good friend.” Marty rested his chin on Adrian’s shoulder. “Thank you.”

“Any time.”

“So, when are you going to find someone to run away for the weekend with?”

“Never.” Adrian snorted. “I’d rather not waste my time.”

“That’s unusually cynical for you, doctor. Especially after what you just said.” Marty cut to the bone. “Don’t tell me you’re still thinking about that flake you met last year.”

Now Adrian was the one shrugging in a “let’s drop the topic immediately” expression.

What did Marty expect? Of all the bad experiences Adrian had gone through, his last attempt to find a lover went down in the books as the worst. The guy worked as a TA for the organic chemistry lab, and they'd seemed to hit it off on a personal level. After inviting Adrian out for coffee a couple of times, the next invite was for drinks at a club. They'd kissed a couple of times, then headed to the guy's apartment.

Sex had been Adrian's plan for the rest of the evening, but the second he'd dropped to his knees and touched the man's cock, everything went to hell. Between loud and angry declarations that he "wasn't gay," the panicked TA threw Adrian out of the apartment. The rest of the semester in lab ended up being an exercise in awkward moments; he wouldn't even look Adrian in the eye.

"One botched blowjob shouldn't stop you from trying again," Marty said, no doubt trying to be helpful.

A blush of utter embarrassment spread across Adrian's cheeks in a heated rush. "Thanks," he mumbled through his gritted teeth.

He loved Marty like a brother, but whatever other mortifying sexual experiences came along, Adrian planned on not sharing them. Not unless he wanted to keep hearing about them over and over again.

"But between classes, volunteer work here, and the part-time job at the clinic, it's not like I have an overflow of free time for a social life." Adrian set his attention back on the cage, hoping to change the subject. "Also, I think you're wrong about this guy." He reached in, stretching his fingers out toward the cat. "It's male."

"You're good with animals, but not that good," Marty replied, skeptical. "Get your hand out of there, before he-she-it bites it."

"He's not aggressive, just scared," Adrian explained. "How would you feel if you got lost in a maze of alleys, caught by a stranger, and then penned up in a weird place like this?"

"Pretty bitchy," Marty admitted.

“And lonely too,” Adrian whispered.

The cat stretched out of its tight position with a faint meow. The tension in its body visibly lessened as it cautiously moved forward to nose Adrian’s fingertips. It meowed again, a small, mournful sound that would’ve tugged on even the most frigid heart. Smiling, Adrian scratched the downy white fur under its chin.

“I’ll be damned,” Marty murmured. “He likes you.”

“It’s all in the magic touch.” Adrian felt the vibrations in the cat’s throat as he started to purr. “Poor little guy. He’s well groomed, well fed, and obviously loved, considering what an interesting collar he’s wearing. I bet he misses his home.”

As suddenly as the cat had warmed up to Adrian, his mood changed. With a hiss, he swatted at Adrian’s hand and grazed the skin with a set of razor-sharp claws.

“Ow.” Adrian pulled back. The cat scrunched back into the corner, a tight ball of tense muscles and fur.

“What happened to that ‘magic touch’?” Marty raised a brow.

“I’ll choose to ignore the sarcasm in that comment.” Adrian flashed his friend a dry look.

The scratches were only superficial. A series of three red lines marked where the skin had been scraped, but not broken. Adrian closed the cage, then stood. “I’ll finish up in here, if you like.”

“You sure?”

Adrian nodded. “There’s not much left to do.”

“Thanks, Adri, I owe you one.” Marty clapped him on the shoulder. “Maybe I’ll catch James for a late dinner.”

“Have fun.” Adrian chuckled as he watched his friend make a beeline out of the room. The front door closed a minute or two later with a loud click as the lock slid into place.

Adrian dug out the first aid kit from one of the storage cabinets. After cleaning the scrapes on his hand with some antiseptic, he went through the shelter, making sure everyone was settled in for the night.

When he reached his new friend's kennel last, Adrian found the cat still tense and curled up in a ball. The two dishes of food and water looked untouched, meaning the poor little guy was so frightened he hadn't had anything to eat or drink. Adrian unlatched the kennel from its slot in the wall and slipped it out so he could carry the whole box to the small adjoining room the shelter's staff used as an office.

He flicked on the lights and closed the door behind him. The room was large enough to accommodate a secondhand computer desk with an old iMac, a creaky manager's chair, one bookshelf, and a filing cabinet upon which Adrian rested the pet carrier. He popped the door open.

"There's no reason for you to stay cooped up in there." Adrian peeked inside the kennel. The cat watched him with those stunningly blue, unblinking eyes. "Come on out and stretch your legs for a while."

It took a little time before the cat felt comfortable enough to explore. Only after Adrian took a seat at the desk and started working at the computer did he venture out.

Painfully shy at first, he would peer out from the cage and duck back inside if Adrian turned his way. Then he became bolder, jumping down to the floor and cautiously making his way around the office area. Under the fluorescent lights, his fur shone like polished black and white marble, and the silver links on his collar glinted.

The cat sniffed at the bookshelf, then moved toward Adrian.

Adrian smiled. "Isn't that better than being stuck in the kennel?" The cat rubbed up against his legs, nosing under the hem of the pants to lick the skin above Adrian's ankles.

"Meow."

"Now you're my best friend again." Adrian chuckled.

Bending over, he scooped up the cat. The little guy was purring so much his entire body quivered like a vibrator. Adrian set him down on the desk and scratched under his chin and behind his ears. The cat's purrs deepened with each caress, and he stretched out on top of the keyboard with coy flicks of his tail.

"For a cat, you sure put on a pretty sexy act." Adrian laughed, shaking his head. He rubbed his temple. "I've been hitting the books too hard, I think. My brain is getting fried if I'm starting to think sexy thoughts about cats."

"Meow."

Damned if there wasn't a twinkle in the cat's eyes to suggest he laughed right along with Adrian.

"I better finish this lost animal bulletin before I end up adopting you myself." Adrian leaned back in his chair with a sigh. "Your real owners have to be missing you."

The cat rolled to his feet, his playfulness forgotten. The change in mood was as bizarre and abrupt as it had been earlier, only this time the cat directed his attack toward the computer. Before Adrian could react, the animal darted behind the iMac and tumbled through the octopus of wires and cables sandwiched between the computer and the wall. The monitor went black as the power cord popped out of place.

"Oh no," Adrian groaned. "Naughty kitty."

"Meow."

The cat reappeared with a smug look, eyes half-closed and pupils narrowed into vertical slits. His glossy fur now had a dull coat of gray dust, and he promptly started to give himself a tongue bath.

Adrian leaned an elbow on the table and rested his chin in his hand. He raised an eyebrow at the cat, which was too busy grooming to pay him any mind. "You're going to be trouble, aren't you?"

Chuckling, he leaned back in the squeaky chair. The cat promptly hopped onto his lap, flicking that soft, cottony tail under Adrian's nose while rubbing against his chest. Sitting back on his haunches, the cat rested its paws on the front of Adrian's shirt and stared up at him with those round, sparkling, and utterly bewitching eyes.

Adrian reached up to rub the cat's soft, curved cheeks. "You are just the sweetest little..." The last word of his sentence hitched in his throat as his hands touched skin.

Not fur.

Not whiskers.

Warm, smooth skin.

A heavy weight settled on his lap, making the chair creak. Two human arms slipped around his neck, while two human legs straddled his upper thighs. Those same big, beautiful blue eyes continued to stare up at Adrian, except they were now set in a human face.

"Oh my God." Adrian gasped.

"Hi." The young man's plump lips turned up in a seductive smile that matched the velvet tone of his voice. He cradled the back of Adrian's neck, drawing them together in a kiss.

## Chapter Two

Adrian's mind went blank the moment those silky lips touched his.

The young man worked his mouth open in a series of persuasive motions, sucking and tugging on Adrian's lower lip. Equally as enticing as his lips, the young man's tongue, strangely but pleasantly rough along the top, slipped inside of Adrian with a few tentative flicks.

Lost in the heat of the kiss, Adrian opened up to those explorative caresses without protest.

Encouraged, the young man probed deeper. Using a series of slow, teasing strokes with tongue on tongue, he caressed Adrian, fondled him from the inside out. The whole concept of oral sex took on a new dimension; the deliciously sinful way the young man's tongue moved made it hard to tell if this was a kiss, or mouth-to-mouth fucking.

When the other man sat back and pulled out of their lip-lock, Adrian actually whimpered. Laughing playfully, the guy dipped forward to flick the tip of his tongue across one corner of Adrian's mouth. His eyes shimmered. "You taste like strawberries."

"I, uh, I had a Fanta before coming here." Adrian swallowed.

The man laughed again, the sound as pretty as his smooth oval face with its slightly pointed chin. The black hair at the back of his neck was cropped short, while at the top of his head, his hair fell down the sides of his face in sheets of white, tousled strands.

A silver choker covered his throat like a collar. When the guy tossed back his head to get the bangs out of his eyes, the quarter-sized rings attached to the chain jingled.

What the hell? Now that the kiss was over and whatever spell of mind-numbing lust clouding his brain had dissipated, some of Adrian's ability to think clearly returned. He scrambled to come up with some kind of logical explanation.

Locked building. Alone in closed room. Cat on lap. Nude guy on lap.

Oh my God...nude. Somehow, that little detail had escaped Adrian's notice earlier.

His gaze now swept over the man's stunning body, taking in the sight of his naked, flawless ivory skin. Toned shoulders and a smooth chest led down to a well-defined ripple of muscles at the stranger's abs. Two chiseled indentations at his hips curved down past the flat area of his lower abdomen, drawing Adrian's attention to the man's rock hard erection.

"Oh..." Whatever Adrian had wanted to say died in his throat.

Everything else about him was pretty. But the guy's prick was downright beautiful.

The shaft curved up in a graceful arc from a bed of glossy white curls that looked softer to the touch than usual pubic hair. Adrian found himself resisting a powerful urge to trace a finger through those curls, and he squirmed from the pressure.

The man spread his legs even more, allowing them to drape down over the sides of Adrian's thighs and the chair. The movement spiked the guy's arousal, and he let out a tiny gasp. His cock lengthened and jerked up, revealing the flushed underside where the vein fluttered under the pink skin in time with his pulse. A blush spread down from the tip of his prow-shaped head, deepening the color of his penis to a shade of rose.

Adrian couldn't stop staring. He felt like a teenaged kid again, finally getting hold of some homoerotic porn and gawking at the sight of an unbelievably amazing and fully erect cock for the first time. Staring at his own hormone-driven boners notwithstanding.

Since then, he'd seen his share of real-life penises, and he definitely wasn't a virgin. Neither of those facts stopped the blood from rushing to his dick in the biggest hard-on he'd experienced in ages.

Mortified beyond expression, Adrian felt heat spread across his cheeks while his cock strained against the front of his jeans. He squirmed underneath the guy again, breaking out in a sweat from the heat of his desire.

Grinning so two dimples showed on his cheeks, the man pulled himself farther up Adrian's lap. The underside of his cock rubbed the bulge on the front of Adrian's pants.

"Mmm," he purred. The sound came out like a genuine feline purr, with a throaty rumble that sent vibrations through the guy's entire body. Adrian felt the quivering on his lap, like a motor running at high idle, another sexy thought that stiffened him right up.

His cock kicked against the front of his pants, the prominent swell straining the denim. He stared down at the bulge and couldn't help gaping at the naked guy's lovely erection some more. He tried to swallow, but found his mouth dry.

Dropping his hands from around Adrian's neck, the young man unfastened the button at the top of Adrian's jeans.

"W-wait," Adrian stammered.

"Don't be shy, Adrian." The man bit down on his lower lip with a smile as sweet as it was seductive.

"How did you know my --" He didn't have time to finish the question before the guy pressed a finger over Adrian's lips.

"Shh." He winked. "Now it's your turn to show me yours." He pulled down Adrian's zipper.

Adrian's heart pounded against his rib cage, his cock jerking up in an all-too-eager attempt to feel the guy's fingers wrapped around it. "Stop!" Adrian panicked.

The man froze. His blue eyes widened into round disks beneath a fringe of black lashes. "Don't you want me?"

"No." Adrian shook his head so fast he got dizzy.

"But your cock is so hard." The man traced his finger along the open seam, and Adrian let out a high-pitched squeak. Somehow, he managed to keep a grip on himself without spilling in his pants.

"I mean, I do want you -- badly," Adrian panted. "But I -- I can't just...I don't even know who you are."

"Does it matter?" The guy reached into Adrian's jeans. "As long as the sex feels good, right?"

"Right," Adrian agreed without thinking, his libido taking over control of his brain. "No, wait." He gulped before making an attempt to correct himself. "I didn't mean that. I think we need to cool off and figure out what the hell is going on...ahh!"

The man slipped a hand into Adrian's open fly. Cool fingers discovered the part at the front of his briefs and nestled in to caress the hot shaft. The guy coaxed Adrian's organ out into the open, and the flushed penis bobbed up in his palm. He gave one stroke from the tip to the base, and the resulting burst of sensation thrust Adrian beyond the edge of self-control -- and right out of his seat.

Common sense flew out the nearest window on a Concorde. The rest of Adrian's body revved up into overdrive. A jolt arced through his stimulated cock, and he jerked back from the rush of desire. The squeaky, beat-up old chair couldn't support the shift in weight and tottered over.

Together with the man perched on top of him, Adrian tumbled backward onto the floor. His head hit the tile with a dull thud, and the room dissolved in a shower of white stars.

\* \* \* \* \*

A sharp, persistent series of beeps forced Adrian back to consciousness. He recognized the annoying jangle as his cell phone's default ringtone. His eyes fluttered open and he blinked up at the ceiling, completely disoriented.

Lifting a hand to his throbbing forehead, he groaned. "What happened?"

"Meow."

Adrian managed to lift his head off the floor to stare at the black and white cat curled up on his chest.

"Oh yeah." He licked his lips. Flashes of the naked, hot, and totally fabricated man came back to him.

When the cat had first jumped on his lap, he must have lost his balance on the crappy old chair, fallen backward, and lost consciousness. The dream man who'd straddled him had been just that: a dream.

"Guess I hit my head pretty hard." Adrian laughed weakly.

Sitting up, he gently set the kitty down beside him. The chuckles died as soon as he caught sight of the front of his pants.

A dark wet spot spread out over his crotch and the insides of his thighs. He touched the sticky fluid and groaned. Ejaculating in his pants from a semierotic fantasy that didn't even have a chance to go anywhere...nice.

Running a hand through the messy waves of his hair, Adrian reached for his cell. The phone was pinned under the overturned chair and buzzing furiously at not having been

answered yet. Grateful that it still worked after his klutzy spill, he flipped the cell open and mumbled, "Hello."

"Hey," Marty's voice sounded on the other end of the line. "Is everything okay? I've been trying to reach you for the past half hour to see if you needed help down there. I was getting worried."

"Sorry." Adrian rubbed the back of his head, flinching when he touched a sore spot. "I got busy and left my phone in the office. Didn't hear it ringing until now."

He glanced at his wristwatch. Damn, he'd been out for an hour.

"You sound groggy," Marty observed. "Want me to head on over?"

"No." Adrian gulped. Getting caught with his jeans creamed would be an experience in ultimate humiliation he'd rather live without. "I'm fine. Really, it's all good."

"You sure?"

Even with his head pounding, Adrian detected the sadness in his friend's voice. "Aren't you and James supposed to be having dinner?"

He sighed. "Not tonight."

Adrian frowned. "Sorry, Marty."

"It's fine." He imagined Marty shrugging. "But I've got lots of pizza left over, so if you're planning on pulling an all-nighter at the shelter..."

"Actually, I was about to head home for tonight." Adrian winced at the stab of guilt he felt for blowing Marty off.

The cat meowed and rubbed against the side of his rib cage. He absently reached over to stroke the little guy. "There's an anatomy and phys exam on Monday, so my weekend is booked."

"Right, right." Marty sighed again. "Just so you know, you're the only person I have on speed dial who picked up their phone tonight."

“Pathetic, huh?” Adrian laughed dryly, eyeing the sticky mess at the front of his pants. *You have no idea, Marty.*

“I swear, the best companions are the furry critters we take care of in the shelter,” his friend said. “Have a good night.” He hung up before Adrian could respond.

Snapping the phone closed and tucking it back into his pocket, Adrian climbed to his feet. He set the chair upright and reached behind the computer to see if he could fix the tangle of loose cords. The cat nuzzled his ankles, tail up in the air.

“Something tells me you’re not going to be happy if I try leaving you behind with the rest of the animals here.” Adrian abandoned his attempt to reconnect the monitor. Sending out the bulletin for the lost pet could wait until tomorrow, and there couldn’t be any harm in taking the cat home for the night.

“C’mon.” He scooped up the purring fur ball. Before slipping him back into the kennel, Adrian paused. “Sorry, but I’m just too curious.” He lifted the cat’s tail and took a peek.

“I knew it.” Adrian smirked to himself.

Holding the kennel over the front of his pants to cover the stain, he flicked off the lights and left the office. Adrian gave the other animals a quick look on the way out of the shelter, then locked up behind him and crossed the lot to his car. After securing the kennel in the back seat with a seatbelt, he climbed in and started for his apartment.

Even with the radio on, Adrian thought he heard the cat purr the entire drive home.

## Chapter Three

Adrian pulled into the closest empty parking spot he could find. At ten o'clock on a Friday night, he didn't have to try too hard.

Most of the stalls in the complex were empty, except for the landlord's at the end of the row. A good, if not anal-retentive building super, Mr. Vasquez made it clear that pets were as welcome in the eighty-apartment complex as termites, solicitors, and other enemies of suburbia.

Slipping out of the driver's side as quietly as possible, Adrian opened the back door and unbuckled the pet carrier. He ducked out and locked up the car, then made a dash for the outdoor staircase leading up to the second floor of the red brick building. His apartment was right at the corner, and he slipped inside quickly.

After making sure the blinds facing the parking lot were closed, he turned on the lights and set the kennel down. "Home sweet home," Adrian said, popping open the latch.

*As if you could keep the cat*, he reminded himself. The real owners must miss him already.

"Ah well, it'll be fun for a couple of days." Adrian hadn't had a pet since he left home for college six years ago, and he missed the experience. For someone studying to be a

veterinarian, he wished he'd been able to find an apartment closer to campus that allowed indoor pets.

The cat sashayed out of the plastic box with a meow. "Shh, keep it down, Whiskers." Adrian grinned. "You'll get me evicted if you're too vocal."

While his guest moved on to explore the apartment, Adrian kicked off his sneakers. Not being able to keep pets in the apartment sucked, but at least the place had a washer and dryer. The laundry was set in the wall to his right, covered by two sliding doors so it looked like a closet next to the front door. He shoved one of the doors to the side with a rusty squeak and stripped. He tossed his sticky jeans and briefs into the washer.

Naked from the waist down, Adrian moved through the apartment. Textbooks and anatomy charts overwhelmed the couch, coffee table, and TV in the living room to his left. The kitchen didn't contain too much of a mess, because Adrian didn't have time to make one.

Not a big eater to begin with, he usually scarfed down a quick lunch at or near campus. At home, he tended to use the kitchen mostly for coffee before going out for a run in the mornings or when he needed a caffeine boost while cramming for a test. Only a stack of newspapers waiting to be recycled covered a section of the bistro table in the narrow dining area.

No sign of the cat anywhere. Adrian figured his guest had gone on into the bedroom and followed. He turned on the lamp on the dresser by the door and froze midstep, eyes glued to the bed.

"Oh God." Adrian gasped. His jaw practically hit the floor.

The same beautiful -- and naked -- man from before lay draped across Adrian's bed. He sat up when the lamp switched on, his eyes refracting the incandescent light while his pale skin seemed to glow. "You found me." The stranger smiled, as if they'd been playing a game.

“How hard did I get hit?” Adrian squeezed his eyes shut and touched the sore spot on the back of his head. “This isn’t real.”

“It’s even nicer and bigger than I imagined,” the other man drawled.

Adrian’s eyes flew open, his heart skipping a few beats. His penis responded to the compliment with an excited jerk upward, reminding Adrian of his half-naked state. Without thinking, his hands darted down to cover himself.

“I meant your apartment.” The man licked his rosy lips. He pulled himself up to his knees, thighs spread open over the mattress to fully expose the length of his cock. The sac below the shaft looked smooth, rounded, and heavy. When he leaned back to rest on his palms, the small pink opening at his rear came into view.

“But your cock is beautiful too,” he said, with a coy and absolutely wicked smile.

A wordless moan of part confusion but mostly arousal tumbled out of Adrian. His hands dropped away from his hardening prick before the temptation to start masturbating took over. After a few calming breaths, he counted slowly to ten before approaching the bed.

“I’m tired. I’m stressed. I possibly have a concussion. You’re not really here.” Adrian tapped one finger on the man’s forehead.

The skin sure felt smooth and warm and tangible enough to be real. “Oh hell.” Adrian tried to swallow, but his mouth was too dry.

Still smiling, the guy sat forward and rose to a kneeling position. He tilted his face up, kissing Adrian on the tip of his nose with soft, plump lips. “Why don’t you feel me all over and make sure?” the man invited with a wink.

God, Adrian wanted to. The lust building up inside of him urged him to climb onto the bed and rub his hands across every inch and contour of this beautiful man. He managed to keep his impulse in check despite the way his body screamed for sex. His cock throbbed and his balls ached, but Adrian refused to make a move while his mind raced.

How did this man get into the shelter and the apartment? Why was he naked? Why did Adrian want to screw him like there was no tomorrow?

"You think too much," the man sighed. He gripped the front of Adrian's zip-down sweatshirt and yanked him to the bed.

Adrian flopped onto the mattress with a strangled cry. The guy pinned him down, topping him before Adrian had a chance to catch his breath.

"That's better," the man purred. Again, the sound rumbled in his chest and traveled down through his body. Adrian felt the vibrations in the man's thighs as they straddled his upper abdomen.

"Don't pass out on me again," the guy warned, his grin taking on a more mischievous quality. He dipped down, the perfect cupid's bow of his upper lip parting from the full, plump bottom.

"Who are you?" Adrian blurted out before he got swept away in the desire to kiss that sensual mouth.

The young man sat up straight, smoothing both hands across the front of Adrian's sweatshirt. "You're not too quick, huh?" He sighed and shrugged. "Call me Whiskers if you want."

"Oh, come on." Adrian's voice cracked. "This is a joke, isn't it?" Now everything started to make sense. "Marty put you up this." He propped himself up on one elbow while he wagged a finger at the man. "That's why he wanted to come back to the shelter -- to see how his little prank played out. You're some stripper he hired."

The stranger's expression soured fast. "I'm not a stripper."

"You're a prostitute?" Adrian was horrified. Marty had actually hired a male hooker to take him for a ride. A kid who couldn't be older than twenty! "I'm giving that asshole a call right now," he growled.

The man pushed him back down on the bed. "I'm not a prostitute either. And if you just shut up and start playing along, I'll pretend you didn't hurt my feelings with that line." He bent over to kiss Adrian, who stopped him again.

"Wait, wait, wait." Adrian exhaled slowly. Gripping him by the shoulders, Adrian held the man at arm's length. "Please tell me what's going on, because I think I'm going out of my mind."

"Why?"

"Well..." Adrian let out a short burst of nervous laughter. "If Marty didn't put you up to this, then... You'll think I'm nuts, this idea is just too crazy."

"No I won't." The young man grinned.

"Yes, you will." Adrian giggled again. "It's just too funny. I mean, your hair is black and white, you're wearing a collar, you purr, for God's sake..."

The man's grin widened. "I'm your new pet."

Adrian watched in complete shock as the guy shrank right on top of him, becoming lighter in weight also. His form lengthened, a coat of shiny black and white hair covering his body. Fingers melted into paws, ears became two perfect little triangles set on a perfectly feline face. A tail swished back and forth across Adrian's abdomen, tickling his cock.

"Oh my God." Adrian let out the breath he'd been holding. "Oh my God. This is real." He held both sides of the cat's face in his hands. Sure enough, it was the same little guy from the shelter, the same little guy he'd brought home. "You're real."

The cat shifted again as quickly and smoothly as before. Adrian held the young man's face in his hands, his heart pounding now for more reasons than sexual desire.

"This is amazing," he whispered.

"We haven't even started yet," the man replied in a throaty drawl. He dipped in to kiss Adrian, their lips melting together.

## Chapter Four

A warm, pleasant feeling coursed through Adrian. The pulsing sensation settled in his groin, and his cock swelled from the rush of blood. He moaned into the man's mouth as his erection stabbed up into the empty air, stiff and aching to be relieved.

Easing out of the kiss, the man traced a path down the side of Adrian's neck with his lips. Each of the silky, fleeting touches made the skin tingle on contact. A shiver of delight coursed through Adrian and ended in his cock, his erection hardening further.

Glancing up with a pleased look, the guy pushed back with his hips. He met Adrian's eyes as the curve of his rear rubbed the rigid length.

A shuddering gasp burst out of Adrian. His cock jerked in response to each stroke, his hips thumping on the mattress with instinct-driven thrusts he had no control over. He wanted to be buried inside that rounded butt, feeling the man's heat wrap around his hard shaft as he slid into the tight passage.

The desire alone had Adrian on the verge of spilling all over himself. He bit down on his lower lip, and the twinge of pain took some of the desperation out of him. Settling both hands at the young man's waist, he persuaded the teasing strokes to stop.

“You’re killing me,” Adrian panted. Beads of sweat trickled down the sides of his forehead and glazed his skin. Underneath the zip-down sweatshirt, he was hot, stifled, and uncomfortable. Stripping naked felt like the best idea since the wheel’s invention.

He sat up on his elbows, wincing as the young man slid farther down his waist and put more pressure on his cock.

“Am I really going too fast for you?” the guy asked with a hint of a smirk tugging at his lips. “Or are you holding back?”

Flustered, Adrian jerked at the zipper to his sweatshirt. “A little of both,” he answered honestly. “It’s not every day I have sex with a...” His sentence trailed off as the other man put a steady hand over his, helping him undo the zipper.

“It’s not every day you have any sex at all, is what you mean.” He looked up at Adrian from beneath the wispy black and white bangs falling across his eyes. “There’s no scent of it anywhere on your bed. You haven’t been pleased in ages.”

Not since last New Year’s, when he’d fooled around with Marty in the living room. Not that their relationship had ever moved beyond close friendship, or their sex more than casual. Adrian fumbled for an excuse while the young man pulled the sweatshirt away from his shoulders and tugged the damp undershirt off.

“I’ve been busy with classes and work.”

“But you’re such a sexual creature.” The man arched a perfectly shaped brow.

Adrian guessed it took one to know one. He must have looked skeptical even with his hard-on pressed up to the other man’s ass, because the guy rocked back against the stiff organ. Adrian shivered, his cock vibrating with another one of those excited jolts.

“Just like I said.” The man smirked. He flung Adrian’s clothes off to one side and pushed him back onto the mattress. “Don’t hesitate anymore. Take me. I want to be yours.”

“I don’t even know who you are,” Adrian said, caressing the man’s cheek.

Brushing a few damp strands of hair out of Adrian's eyes, he offered another one of those sinfully playful smiles. "You can call me whatever you like."

"But I want to know your real name," Adrian whispered.

The man's eyes widened with blatant surprise. He cocked his head at Adrian as if the request was really unusual. Some of the playful, mischievous air surrounding him disappeared. A sad and lost, maybe even frightened, look flickered across his face. He fingered the silver collar at his throat, lips pressed into a thin pink line.

Adrian cupped his chin. "Please?"

Trembling, the man was silent before he finally met Adrian's stare. "Lal," he whispered.

Such a soft, lyrical name, perfect to whisper during mornings wrapped in each other's arms or to cry out in the heat of passion. That was enough to know for now, and Adrian didn't want to push him into revealing more than he was ready or willing to.

He slipped a hand behind Lal's neck, drawing him down so their lips met. The kiss consumed them both in its intensity, gentle at first, then quickly deepening and heating. Moving together in unison, their mouths opened to each other's probing tongues. Adrian tasted himself inside of Lal, and he drank in their shared passion until his lungs burned for air.

Breathing heavily, they parted. Lal nuzzled against Adrian to suck and nip at the spot where his neck curved to meet his shoulder. Adrian squirmed under the series of tickling, teasing kisses, feeling the press of Lal's erection on his belly. He moved both hands to the small of Lal's back, holding him tightly in place. The hard shaft swelled and dug into Adrian, throbbing in time with the pulsing in Adrian's cock. Now it was Lal who moaned and fidgeted with desire on top of Adrian.

Arching up, Lal let out a throaty groan. His penis stabbed up from the downy wedge of pale curls, thick, flushed, and practically begging to be sucked off.

Adrian couldn't postpone his own release much longer. He yanked open the top drawer of the nightstand to rummage through the sparse contents within. He found some lubricant, unused for God knew how long. Squirting a daub of the gel into his palm, he reached past Lal's hip to find his own cock, engorged and rigid as a pole. Smearing the stuff over the entire shaft was enough to bring him dangerously close to climax. The rush of blood thundered in his ears and flooded his groin, precum trickling down the length as he coated his penis with the lubricant.

Watching Adrian through half-slit eyes, Lal stretched back. The curve of his rear rubbed the tip of Adrian's cock, and both men squirmed from the rush of sensation. Adrian's shaft stiffened even more, lengthening in his grip. He couldn't remember having ever become so hard for a lover before.

Lal's own sex reacted the same way. A bright shade of pink to match the blush spreading across his pale cheeks, his prick looked plump and stiff -- almost painfully so. Lal had to be aching to touch and soothe that swelling erection.

But instead of taking himself in hand, Lal gripped his thighs. Except his fingers kept slipping on the smooth, sweat-glazed skin. He pressed his lips together so tightly they formed a thin pink line as he tried to keep his grip. Whimper after whimper slipped out of him.

Maybe Lal could resist the urge to touch himself, but Adrian didn't possess the same willpower. Seeing the man struggle to keep fingers away from cock, he brought his free hand around and seized the erection. The organ was just as hot and firm and wonderful to the touch as it looked.

A shiver coursed through Lal. He jerked up, lifting off Adrian's torso with a yelp.

"I'm sorry!" Startled, Adrian let go. Had he moved too fast or stroked too hard? Was this strange, amazing man as sensitive as he was beautiful?

“Don’t,” Lal pleaded. He grabbed Adrian’s wrist, bringing the trembling fingers back to his sex. “You touched me.” He sounded shocked and looked it too, with eyes wide and round like twin blue pools.

It was enough to make Adrian wonder if anyone had ever touched Lal with the purpose of giving him pleasure.

Lal gasped, shaking all over the moment Adrian’s hand closed around his prick. The organ leapt inside of Adrian’s slick grip.

This time he didn’t let go. Adrian rubbed Lal’s cock in a series of slow, firm strokes. Until he knew what special touch Lal preferred in his hand jobs, Adrian would do everything he enjoyed on his own cock. Rolling his thumb over the head, gently massaging the shaft with the flat of his palm, and applying just a bit of pressure at the base, he lavished the pretty, quivering organ with as much attention as he could.

Lal loved it all. His hips gave short half-thrusts into Adrian’s hand, and his breath came in rushed gasps. Panting and trembling all over, Lal reached behind himself to take Adrian’s cock. His fingers slid on the coat of gel, driving Adrian crazy. His free hand squeezed Lal’s hip, and he clamped his eyes shut as he raced toward climax.

“I’m going to come,” he managed between ragged breaths.

Lal positioned the tip of Adrian’s cock at his opening. The taut little mouth stretched open to receive the thick tip as he pushed down, seizing the head almost desperately. Adrian drove into the passage, suddenly enveloped in taut, hot muscle. He thrust upward, eager to feel it cover the entire length of his cock.

The thatch of curls surrounding the base of his erection sealed around the opening. Adrian was completely nestled inside the welcoming body. He pitched his hips upward with two more thrusts, finding Lal’s most sensitive place at last.

Throwing his head back, the young man cried out Adrian's name, and a gush of warm semen jetted through Adrian's fingers as Lal spurted. He rocked back and forth, riding Adrian hard and groaning.

Unable to hold back any longer, Adrian lost control. The orgasm seized his entire body, muscles tensing and contracting against the rush. A wordless, guttural cry vibrated in his chest as he writhed on the bed. Cum burst from his cock, flooding the tight passage, enveloping his length in the wetness, and Adrian surrendered completely to the indulgent pleasure. The release felt amazing -- months of tension and frustration yielded to this perfect moment of blind passion. His cock jerked within the hot, slick, and utterly delicious passage; his body trembled.

Conscious of the other man's soft moans, Adrian pumped his hips with the same frantic pace that he used to stroke Lal's cock. Cum leaked past his shaft and ran down to his sac.

Coming again in a shuddering release, Lal covered Adrian's midriff in a sticky coat. He moaned, riding out the last few of Adrian's spastic thrusts while both men emptied.

Exhausted, chest heaving, Adrian ground to a stop. He cupped Lal's rear, supporting the smaller man's weight as his cock slipped free.

He shivered. The bedroom air felt too cool on his heated flesh, especially after the warmth of Lal's body. Already, he wanted to be locked in another embrace with this man.

Lal pitched forward to rest on his palms. He looked as tired, but sated, as Adrian felt. A droplet of sweat rolled off the delicate slope of Lal's nose and onto Adrian's chest, and he bent down to flick the tip of his tongue over the spot. The fast and oddly coarse touch sent a different kind of shiver through Adrian.

"I'll clean you all up." Lal glanced up, the coy smile returning to play on his lips. "How does a tongue bath sound?"

“Almost as good as you lying down next to me,” Adrian replied tenderly. The bath and whatever other sexual exploits it led to could wait. “For now, I just want to feel your body beside mine.”

Lal straightened and used one of the rumpled bed sheets to wipe away the sticky fluid on Adrian’s belly. Emitting nothing but soft purrs, he eased down to the bed to curl up against Adrian.

“I think I’m going to fall in love,” Lal whispered.

Adrian wrapped an arm around Lal’s waist. “I think I already have.”

## Chapter Five

Crouched low to the ground on his paws, whiskers brushing the rough cement surface, Kal sniffed. A familiar scent came through the tangy mixture, and he stiffened with recognition before shifting form to speak. “He stayed here.” Kal sat back on his heels. “I can smell him.”

The broad-shouldered brute towering over him grunted. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Kal hissed. “He’s been trying to cover his tracks by staying in the territory of other stray cats, but his scent stands out just enough.” No thanks to the pungent odors coming from the large garbage bins behind the restaurants, where a mélange of spoiled meats, sauces, and other waste had been discarded when the establishments closed for the night.

“Are you sure?” Lor repeated, his voice a rumbling baritone that hinted at the power of his Second Nature. Like amber flames, his eyes glowed underneath the shadow of his sweatshirt’s hood. Straggly coils of his crimson mane spilled out halfway down his chest.

Not for the first time that night, Kal wondered if the bodyguard would maintain enough self-control to keep the human façade long enough to get the job done. Lor might be

a brilliant warrior, but he wasn't the sharpest claw in the Master's menagerie when it came to intelligence. At least he wore clothes to cover any unconscious partial shifts.

"Did you hear me?" Lor raised his voice. He gave a sharp tug on the leash attached to Kal's collar for emphasis.

"I'm sure." Kal ground his teeth to hold back the slew of curses brimming on the tip of his tongue. "I think I can recognize my own brother's scent."

"But he's not here." Lor sounded frustrated, pissed, and probably still hungry. He'd picked the bones of a homeless man they'd found sleeping against a Dumpster clean, and left the remains in a heap against the brick walls. But it was hardly enough to satisfy the large cat. Lor looked to the end of the alley, fidgeting impatiently within his own skin like a caged beast.

"Where is he?" Lor gnashed his teeth.

*If I knew that, we'd be home already, you stupid fuck.* Kal stood, enjoying the sensation of his muscles stretching in this human body while it lasted. Too many days spent in one form gave him a cramped, claustrophobic feeling, but he wasn't allowed Lor's privilege to wear clothes. As long as they were stuck in this realm, Kal had to be in his feline Nature to avoid attention. He held back a sigh of bitterness as he worked some slack into the tight loop of silver wrapped around his throat.

"Leave it alone," Lor snarled. "Don't touch it." He yanked on the leash again, and the choker tightened enough for Kal to get the point.

Dropping his hand away, Kal muttered an apology. "Sorry. Though it'll help things move along faster if I can breathe."

"You'll have enough air once that mouth of yours stops moving." That had to be the longest, most complete sentence Lor had ever used. Kal was impressed. At the risk of getting his choker tightened even more, he almost said as much, sarcastically of course. But Lor was in a talkative mood, and the rest of his words unnerved Kal into keeping silent.

“But if you want to keep those lips occupied, I’ll put them to work.” Lor grinned, fangs flashing in the moonlight. Pulling on the chain, he drew Kal toward him. His gaze flicked over Kal’s naked body with unconcealed lust. “I bet it feels good to fuck that pretty mouth of yours, kitten.”

Kal wagered otherwise. Judging from the size of the rest of him, Lor’s dick would be an uncomfortable fit anywhere the bodyguard tried to shove it in. But the big cats didn’t play with the kittens. Breaking that simple rule would leave Lor facing a punishment far more humiliating and emasculating than a tiny collar at his neck.

That almost made the risk worth it.

Smoothing a hand across Lor’s chest, Kal rubbed up against him, bare skin stroking cloth. Solid muscle pushed back under the loose-fitting human clothing, thick, hard, and unyielding, like no human male’s body could ever be. A vibration coursed through Lor’s body. The long, rigid shaft at his front swelled.

*Fuck.* Kal had second and third thoughts all at once, none of them pleasant. But as he started to ease down the zipper over the erection, Lor leapt to the side and swatted Kal’s hand away with a fierce growl. “You think you’re a clever one, don’t you? I know what you’re trying.”

Baring his fangs in another snarl, Lor wrapped the leash around his brawny fist and wrenched backward.

Thrown off his feet, Kal landed on his hands and knees. The choker snapped off his supply of air and dug into his skin. Lungs burning with each vain attempt to gasp, it took all of Kal’s willpower not to claw at the collar.

Satisfied he’d made his point clear, Lor slackened the chain. “Pick up his trail.”

Kal lowered his head, shoulder-length hair falling across his face in a black veil. Hopefully, it hid the fury and hate that must be reflected in his eyes.

*This is all your fault. Being dragged to this hellish human world, tethered in disgrace to a brutish, bloodthirsty guardian like Lor...* Kal's fingernails scratched into the pavement as his hands knotted into fists. *I'll kill you myself, Lal.*

"Something happened." Kal swept back the hair from his eyes. "Like I said before, there were other cats here and a human also, with some kind of vehicle."

"You can smell the oil?" Lor snorted, downplaying Kal's sharper senses with the arrogance all big cats seemed to have in heaps to go with their brawn.

"Lal was taken," Kal replied in an even tone. "Probably by an animal catcher. And there could be any number of shelters in a city this size."

A slew of curses streamed from Lor. "Mother fucking bastard." The words rumbled in his chest like thunder. "He could be anywhere in this shithole!"

"Upsetting, isn't it?"

Lor's claws flexed, his body trembling with fury. "Change," he commanded. "Now. I'll tear down every single fucking building and rip through any human to find that little shit if I have to."

Without rising, Kal shifted Natures, his human body yielding to the smaller feline form within. His skin tingled as glossy currents of black fur covered him, and he shook off the itchy release of power. The collar at his throat jingled softly.

Grabbing him by the back of the neck, Lor snatched Kal up. He sprinted to the end of the alley and into the night.

\* \* \* \* \*

A balmy breeze stirred the strands of hair on the back of Adrian's neck. Slowly drifting awake at the warm, ticklish sensation, he buried his face in the pillow and tried to hold onto the fleeting memory of a lusciously erotic dream.

He lay facedown on the bed, blankets knotted around his bare waist and legs. Some soreness made itself known in the muscles along his shoulders and legs as he shifted position, a delicious reminder of last night's exertions. Adrian turned onto his back and opened one sleepy eye then the other.

Sunlight streamed in from the open window, the blind raised up into its valance. An arm's reach away, Lal lay stretched out on the mattress. Sunning himself, he faced away from Adrian to catch the golden rays. The light traced his silhouette, shining on the glossy, soft black and white fur. Eyes closed, he flicked his tail back and forth across the bed in lazy sweeps.

Adrian rolled closer to scratch the top of the cat's head. With a loud purr, Lal leaned into the touch. He yawned, rows of sharp, curved teeth catching the sunlight, and turned over.

"Hi." Adrian stifled his own yawn.

The smooth, fluid change happened then, a moment of instant magic and blurring of forms as the beautiful cat became a beautiful man. Strands of human hair slipped through Adrian's fingertips when Lal straightened, flashing him a smile.

"Hi yourself." He dipped down, stealing a kiss he didn't have to. Adrian would happily give him as many as he wanted to take.

When Lal started to pull away, Adrian couldn't help reaching up to cradle the back of his neck to draw out the kiss a little longer. They merged together, Lal easing down on top of Adrian as their lips moved in sweet unison. Adrian's cock twitched with interest, refreshed and eager to go after a few hours of sleep. The shaft stiffened, meeting Lal's own firm length as both organs rubbed together.

"Somewhere in between having all this sex, I want to know more about you," Adrian murmured into Lal's mouth.

“Sex first, questions later. Much, much later.” Lal suckled on Adrian’s lower lip. Then his stomach growled, interrupting the soft bedroom noises vibrating between them. Embarrassed, Lal flopped off of him with a groan.

“Maybe some breakfast first.” Adrian chuckled and kissed Lal on the shoulder. He sat up and ran a hand through his mess of sleep-tousled hair. “What would you like?”

“Anything you have is fine,” Lal said. He almost said something else, but made a face as he changed his mind.

“But...?” Adrian nudged him playfully in the side.

“Anything but fish.” Lal crinkled his nose.

Adrian laughed, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. “Okay, no seafood.” He glanced at the clock radio on the nightstand and did a double take. “It’s almost three!” So much for getting in a full day of study for the A and P exam tomorrow, but at least he was fairly confident he knew enough not to bomb the test entirely.

“Are you late for something?” Lal yawned, rolling onto his belly.

“No,” Adrian assured him. “There’s a test I have to take on Monday, but it’ll be all right.”

“So you are a student.” Lal rested his chin in his hand. “I thought your friend called you ‘doctor’ back in the shelter.”

“I’m in my first year of veterinary school.” Adrian grinned. It was funny how being with Lal even for such a short time had him smiling more than he had with another man all year. “Hey, you were listening yesterday?”

“I was right there in the kennel,” Lal said dryly. “Couldn’t help myself.”

Adrian ran his fingers through the silk of Lal’s hair. “I’m sorry about that. If I’d known, I wouldn’t have kept you in that cage for so long or brought you home that way.”

Lal regarded him thoughtfully for a moment. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

“Me?” Adrian blinked in surprise. “Sure, right.” He chuckled. “This coming from a man who can actually change into a cat. That’s amazing.”

“Hmm,” Lal purred. “Now you’re assuming, Adrian. Maybe I’m just a cat who can change into a man.”

Adrian shook his head, chuckling softly. “I don’t see the difference.”

“No, you wouldn’t, would you?” Lal touched Adrian’s wrist, drawing the hand down to his mouth. He kissed the spot where he’d scraped the skin with his nails. “I wish I hadn’t scratched you yesterday.”

“You were scared.” Adrian adored the feel of those satin lips. “And you didn’t even break the skin.”

“Actually, I was pissed,” Lal admitted. He released Adrian’s hand with a sigh. “I don’t miss where I came from, and I was angry at being caught by Animal Control. The thought of going back wasn’t sitting too well.”

“You don’t have to go anywhere you don’t want to, Lal.” Adrian frowned at the collar draped around the young man’s throat. There were so many questions he wanted to ask, but Lal obviously preferred to change the subject.

“Not as long as I can stay where I want to, right?” Lal winked.

“*Mi casa es tuya.*” Adrian looked around the messy bedroom. “Not that it’s much.”

“It has the most important thing -- a comfortable bed.”

“And someone to share it with,” Adrian added.

“When was the last time you had sex?” Lal asked the question without hesitation.

Adrian felt a blush of embarrassment heat his cheeks. “Do you mean in a relationship that actually mattered?” He added quietly, “With a partner who’s not just looking for a quick fuck?”

“Any kind,” Lal said gently.

Letting out a puff of air, Adrian confessed. "It's been a while, not since Marty and I messed around a few months ago. Before that..." Adrian decided the infamous moment of embarrassment with the chemistry TA wasn't worth mentioning.

"Marty was your last lover, then."

Adrian shook his head. "We did have sex once," he explained. "But we were lonely and I guess we drank a little too much. Afterwards, both of us felt strange waking up in bed together. I've never been more than a close friend to Marty, never a lover." He felt naked in a way that was very different from being nude, but not uncomfortably so. Opening himself up to Lal came easily, not that Adrian could explain why. "Which is funny, since we're both comfortable with each other and our sexuality. I don't know. It just never worked out that way between us."

"It's your friend's loss." The tip of Lal's pink tongue flicked over his lips.

A different kind of heat circulated through Adrian's body. "Well, Marty's seeing someone now who makes him very happy." On impulse, Adrian bent over and kissed Lal on the forehead. "I'm not doing so bad either."

"Except maybe on that test of yours." Lal chuckled.

"Guh." Adrian collapsed backward onto the bed. "I've got flashcards and notes I can go through tomorrow."

"I'll help you study," Lal offered.

"Really?" Adrian propped himself up on his elbows.

"Sure." Lal's voice became a low, sultry whisper. "I did keep you pretty busy last night."

And how.

A spike of lust jolted through Adrian's cock as he remembered the feel of Lal's tight body gripping his shaft. With the young man lying right beside him, the curves of his small, rounded ass within arm's reach, Adrian didn't even try to hide his arousal. In the daylight,

Lal looked even more irresistible, his perfectly sculpted body displayed without inhibition, the flawless skin a temptation to be caressed.

A throbbing pulse originating in Adrian's groin spread throughout his body. He realized with a start he had his penis in hand, unconsciously rubbing up a good hard-on. All the while, Lal stared openly, long silver and black lashes fluttering over his eyes when he blinked. Adrian's cheeks flushed, the blush spreading down to his cock. A pearly droplet of precum appeared at the tip of his cock, and he released the shaft, sitting up quickly.

"I don't mind watching." Lal's velvet, sexually drenched voice washed over Adrian. Erection twitching in response, he shivered as if he'd been touched. How could it be possible for someone to turn him on so unbelievably much?

Adrian began stroking himself again without hesitation. Pleasure spiraled through his body, the muscles in his thighs and abdomen tensing as his cock extended farther.

In one fluid motion, Lal rolled onto knees and positioned himself behind Adrian. He swept the hair away from the back of Adrian's neck and brushed his lips over his nape. Kissing and teasing the skin with his mouth, Lal slipped his arms around Adrian's waist and smoothed his hands over the taut abdominal muscles. The tip of his cock pressed into the small of Adrian's back, hot and firm.

His orgasm building and rising with the intensity of a storm, Adrian's chest heaved. Leaning into Lal's embrace for support, he found himself letting go of everything except his desire, and the heat and closeness of his lover.

His lover... Things between him and Lal were moving insanely fast, and there was so much about this mysterious man he didn't know. But Adrian called Lal his lover so easily, with the excitement of realizing Lal was someone he was absolutely crazy about.

A spasm of erotic pleasure gripped Adrian. The muscles in his body tensed, his balls tight against their nest of curls as he spiraled toward his climax. Spurting into his hand, his

release came with a shout of ecstasy. He sank back into Lal's arms, heart pounding and chest heaving.

Lal gazed down into his eyes, brushing some of the sweaty ringlets of hair from Adrian's forehead. "You came for me," he breathed.

"Not for the first time." Adrian grinned. He welcomed the slow, tender kiss Lal placed on his lips and returned the show of affection. When they finally drew apart, Adrian straightened and wiped himself clean with one of the wrinkled bed sheets. "Let's wash up and go out for something to eat."

Lal grinned. "Sounds like a plan."

\* \* \* \* \*

After a long shower together -- which led to more kissing and touching and orgasms than Adrian could keep track of -- they dressed. Most of Adrian's pants were too long for Lal, who stood about four inches shorter than Adrian, but he fit comfortably in a dark, V-necked T-shirt. He chose a black pair of jeans from the bottom drawer in the dresser, the hems bunching up around his flip-flops.

"We'll get you some better clothes today," Adrian promised.

"These are great." Lal smoothed his hands over his chest, feeling the cotton and grinning. "They also smell like you."

The collar glittered at Lal's throat, and Adrian resisted the urge to ask about it. He hoped Lal would eventually share everything, but for now avoided pressing the matter.

Tugging on a long-sleeved shirt and slipping into a pair of jeans, Adrian finished dressing. He headed into the living room with Lal behind him and paused to pick up his keys and backpack. As they approached the door, Lal hooked onto the back of Adrian's shirt.

"There's a guy out there."

A shadow moved across the windows as someone tried to peer through the closed blinds. Judging from the person's short height and sneaky movements, it wasn't too hard to guess who skulked around outside.

Adrian pulled open the door. "Can I help you, Mr. Vasquez?"

The building manager straightened, a distrustful look on his wrinkled face. "Some tenants called in this morning saying they heard a cat meowing last night. They said it was coming from your apartment."

"A cat?" Adrian cleared his throat. He glanced back at Lal, who shrugged.

"I couldn't help it, you're good in bed."

Adrian whipped around. Mr. Vasquez's olive skin had turned a shade of red, but he was too stubborn to have his suspicion thwarted that easily. Scratching his beard, he narrowed his eyes at Lal. "You made those noises?"

Lal nodded once, caught sight of Adrian's horrified expression, and changed the motion into a crooked shrug. "Now that I'm thinking about it, I can't remember all the different noises I made while we --"

"Hey, hey, I don't need all the details," Vasquez cut him off, his face an even deeper shade of crimson. "Wait..." He squinted at a spot halfway down the doorframe and plucked a white strand of hair from the jamb. "Is this cat hair?"

Bursting into a loud fit of nervous laughter, Adrian shook his head. "No, no, no. A cat in a pet-free building? Absolutely not." He dragged Lal out the door and locked up. "We have to go, Mr. Vasquez. Bye!" He didn't wait for a response before ducking down the stairs and into the parking lot with Lal in tow.

"What does he have against pets?" Lal asked with a scowl, climbing into the passenger seat.

"He's probably never had any." Adrian pulled out of the parking lot.

"And what's his problem with sex?"

“Probably never had any of that either.”

As Adrian turned onto the street, they both laughed.

## Chapter Six

Marty rubbed his eyes, trying to ignore the dull throb of a headache. A late night party of one always led to the worst kind of hangover, one without the satisfaction of knowing he'd at least had a good fuck. The spastic, cheerful barks and yips from the dogs in the shelter didn't help either.

"You guys wouldn't be so chipper if you weren't neutered," he grumbled. Skirting past a family of four who were looking into adopting one of the pups, he decided to check on the feisty guest from last night.

Except the guest was missing, the slot for the cat's kennel completely empty. He knelt down in front of the slot and scratched the stubble on his chin.

"Huh." He flipped open his cell phone and scrolled down to find Adrian's name on his contacts list. After a couple of rings, his friend answered.

"Hi, Marty."

"What happened to 'pets aren't allowed in my complex'?" Marty pressed a palm against the side of his head.

There was a span of silence on the other end of the line, followed by a noncommittal grunt. "Uh..."

Marty scowled. "Or how about 'that's someone's pet, Marty'?"

"He's not," Adrian blurted out. "At least not anymore. Look, it's hard to explain..."

"You better start thinking of a good story for when your landlord finds out." Marty straightened.

"It's not really what you think," Adrian argued. "This isn't something I can just talk about over the phone, but he's special."

"Right." Marty rolled his eyes. "But if the owners come looking for the cat, I have to tell them --"

Another man said something in the background and Adrian blurted out, "No!" He coughed to clear his throat. "If anyone comes looking for him, call me first. Don't tell them anything."

"Do you realize how weird you sound right now?" Marty frowned. "Is everything okay?"

"Just trust me on this, please?"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Thanks, Marty." Adrian let out a relieved sigh and gave Lal a thumbs-up. "I'll owe you one, man." He hung up and slipped his phone into his backpack.

"Can he keep his word?" Lal asked, his blue eyes clouded with doubt.

Adrian nodded. "He probably thinks I'm nuts, but he'll give me the benefit of the doubt. At least for a while. Hopefully, no one claiming to be your owner will show up."

"Hopefully," Lal murmured. He pushed a French fry around on his plate, having ignored all the potatoes served with his chicken strips. "They shouldn't, though. I'm not from anywhere even remotely near this place."

Adrian guessed as much. "Are they here in Florida at all?"

“No.” Lal eyed one of the pieces of meat on Adrian’s plate. Adrian traded the chicken for Lal’s disregarded fries.

“Is there a way they could track you?”

“It’s been two weeks, and I haven’t caught their scent on my tail. I don’t think they’ll bother.”

A heavy silence settled between them in spite of the surrounding din. Hundreds of shoppers were packed into the Oaks Mall for the weekend and crowded the food court. Lal leaned an elbow over the back of his chair and watched the people pass. He shifted in his seat, absently tugging on the hem of his new navy blue T-shirt, and left his new sandals on the floor to tuck both knees under his chin.

He pulled off a quasi-Goth look with his pale skin, black and white hair falling across his eyes, silver chain at his throat, and appreciation for darker clothes, but the way he moved his body reflected a poise that could only be described as feline. And scrunched up the way he was now on the chair, he reminded Adrian of the scared cat tucked away in the kennel back at the shelter.

They’d enjoyed themselves the entire afternoon up until Marty’s phone call. Lal had never been to a shopping mall before, apparently, and had insisted on exploring just about every inch of the complex. Adrian had gotten caught up in his enthusiasm, remembering why he’d liked hanging out in malls as a kid in the first place -- especially when they hit the Tilt arcade. They talked about anything except Lal’s past and discovered they were as good together out of bed as they were in it.

The high-end, flat panel TVs spread throughout the food court were tuned into the local news, and a story about a vandalized animal shelter just outside of Gainesville caught Adrian’s attention. He shook his head in disgust. “How much lower are people going to get?”

Lal turned back to him with a curious frown. Adrian gestured to one of the TVs. "It's not enough to wreck up businesses or homes -- animal shelters have to deal with that kind of shit, too. I don't understand people sometimes. Hell, make that most of the time."

"Maybe that explains why you like being around animals so much." A hint of that playful, teasing smirk appeared at the corners of Lal's mouth.

"Very funny." Adrian shook his head, also smiling, and tossed a fry at him. Lal snatched the bit of food in midair with quick swipe of his hand and dropped it to the table.

"I just love working with animals and always have," Adrian admitted. "Drove my mom crazy every time I brought home a stray or whatever lizard I found in the back of the house."

"It's a habit you still can't break," Lal pointed out.

"Nope." Adrian chuckled. "I don't want to either." He reached across the table and placed his hand over Lal's. "I want to ask you something, and I know you might not be comfortable with it."

"Then don't ask." Lal shrugged nonchalantly, smiling without letting the expression reach his eyes. He tried to change the subject. "Let's study before going back."

"What does the collar mean?"

Adrian squeezed Lal's hand gently to keep him from pulling away. "You don't have to tell me everything if you aren't ready. But I want you to know that whatever kind of life you had before, things are going to be different. I guess...I guess I want you to be as happy with me as I am with you."

He let go of Lal when the man stayed quiet. Adrian ran both hands through his hair, hoping what he'd said made sense. "It's okay to laugh at me if I sound stupid."

"You don't," Lal whispered. He rubbed the back of his neck, fingers gliding along the silver chain. "I'm the only fool here, pretending to be something I'm not."

"What aren't you?"

“Free.” Lal’s hand dropped to the table. “The collar means that every inch of me belongs to someone. I’m a piece of property whose worth is measured by how well he services a Master. Now that I’ve run away, I’m not worth anything.” He looked up at Adrian with those piercing blue eyes. “Those are all the things I’m not.”

“Lal --”

“In your bedroom, I told you I’m your new pet,” Lal interrupted. “But that’s not something I want to be. For once, I’d rather be bound to a lover by something stronger than this chain, and you’re making me feel like that’s possible. But it’s safer to be a pet than a companion, because if I’m wrong about finding love, I’ll at least have this chain.” He looked away toward the large windows facing the massive parking lot. “That answers both questions.”

Lost for words, Adrian stared. Then he got up from the table and knelt beside Lal’s chair. Moving both hands to the back of Lal’s neck, he unfastened the collar.

“Please don’t do this unless you know why,” Lal said, voice deep and husky.

Adrian slipped the chain off and tightened his fist around the warm metal. “Loving you is a good enough reason.”

Lal tensed, his gaze frozen toward the windows instead of meeting Adrian’s. Adrian straightened, intending a kiss to make the depth of his feeling clear. He never saw it coming when Lal bolted from the seat.

The man covered the distance to the food court’s exit and was gone before Adrian had the chance draw a breath.

## Chapter Seven

A note stuck out from between the front door and the frame when Adrian got home. He unfolded the sheet of paper with the apartment building's logo stamped at the top.

"This is a reminder that Cedar Glen Apartments is a pet-free complex, without exception. Please remove your" -- in the blank space, "cat" had been scrawled in red ink -- "as quickly as possible."

A block of text quoting the apartment's rental agreement followed. Adrian didn't bother reading through it. He crumpled the paper in one hand and tossed it over the railing toward the parking lot. "Go ahead and cite me for littering instead," he muttered, not really giving a shit. The cat was already gone.

Adrian trudged inside and kicked the door closed behind him. All the lights were off and most of the blinds closed, making the apartment feel dark, empty. Lonely.

He leaned back against the door and reached into one of his pants pockets. The smooth, warm links of Lal's chain slid through his fingers. It was just about the only thing he had left to prove the man had really existed.

"I'm such an ass." Adrian closed his hand around the metal collar. It would've been better to keep his mouth shut instead of saying all those stupid, stupid things.

Even if he did believe them. Especially the part about being in love.

“You know a good thing when you see it, Adrian,” he sighed to himself. Too bad he didn’t know how to keep it.

Raking a hand through his hair, he crossed through the empty apartment and into the bedroom. He flicked on the light, but avoided looking toward the bed with its rumpled sheets and pillows and the tube of gel on the nightstand. He set his backpack on the floor by the dresser along with the shopping bags from the mall containing Lal’s new clothes. Maybe Lal would come back eventually.

“Or not.” Adrian pulled out the silver chain and set it on the wooden surface. Now that Lal was free from whatever or whomever he’d been bound to, why be stuck here in a building with a super who hates cats? Adrian chuckled to himself, but only halfheartedly. He would’ve liked to be reason enough for Lal to stay.

For the rest of the evening, Adrian tried to get some studying done. He paced the living room area with flashcards in hand, reading the practice questions for the anatomy and physiology exam without actually paying attention to them. Giving up when a knock sounded at the front door, he left the cards on the coffee table and answered.

Vasquez stood on the doorstep, holding a wadded piece of paper. “I found this over there.” The building super jerked a finger toward the dark parking lot. Adrian resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

“I missed the trash can, sorry,” he said dully.

“But you got the note.” Vasquez raised a brow.

“Yes.” Adrian rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s been taken care of.”

“Good.” The older man turned away.

About thirty seconds after Adrian closed the door there was another knock. Vasquez hovered in the entryway again.

“So if I go inside this apartment, there won’t be any cats.” The old man scowled at him, the phrase not really a question.

“Would you like to come look?” Adrian stepped away from the door. “Maybe check out the bedroom?”

Vasquez backpedaled faster than Adrian expected. “No, no, no. That’s okay.”

This time not bothering to stop himself from rolling his eyes, Adrian closed the front door. Before he had a chance to plop down on the couch, another knock sounded.

Adrian yanked the door open. “Look, there aren’t any cats here...” The rest of his sentence died in midthroat when he saw that it wasn’t the surly landlord standing on the doorstep. “Lal...”

The young man smiled, a tender curve of his lips more hopeful than seductive. “Actually, you’ve got two cats.” Curled up in his arms, a solid white cat stared at Adrian with a pair of crystal blue eyes identical to Lal’s. “If you’ll have us,” he added.

“Of course, come on in,” Adrian said without missing a beat. He’d already moved from the door to let them through, and closed it once they were inside.

Lal went to the sofa and dropped down on the cloth cushions. Flashing Adrian a grateful look, he set the white cat down beside him. He looked exhausted, and not just physically. “I’m sorry about taking off like that, but I didn’t stop to think.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Adrian cleared some of his books from the coffee table and took a seat on the glass in front of Lal.

“Please don’t think it was because of what you said.” Lal pressed his lips together, forming a thin, pink line. He absently swept his hand along the cat’s back, his fingers combing through the white fur.

“It’s okay, even if it was.” Adrian squeezed Lal’s shoulder when he longed to kiss him instead. The uncertainty must have shown on his face, because Lal cursed and slumped forward.

“Fuck!” He rested his elbows on his knees, hands tugging at clumps of his hair. “I’m such an idiot!”

“Hey --”

Lal shook his head, interrupting Adrian. “I really screwed up this time. With you and with Caleb.”

Adrian glanced over to the cat sitting patiently beside Lal and watching their exchange with interest. There was no mistaking the human intelligence reflected in those brilliant eyes. “A friend of yours?”

“My brother,” Lal replied.

“Does he change --” Adrian started.

The cat moved as if to stretch, and shifted into a male form identical to Lal’s in almost every way. Caleb knelt on the sofa, his naked body made up of lean muscle beneath smooth, taut skin. His hair was cut shorter than Lal’s messy disarray of black and white locks, and was a pure, wintry white that stood out even against his ivory pale flesh. Aside from those soulful blue eyes, the only real color on Caleb’s body could be found on his cock -- a rosy blush tinted the length from its prow-shaped tip to the white curls framing the base.

“That’s a definite yes.” Adrian rubbed the back of his neck, looking up from Caleb’s attractive sex as he gave a weak greeting. “Hi, I’m Adrian.”

“He knows who you are.” A smile flickered across Lal’s face. “On the way over, I told him everything about you.”

“All good, I hope.” Adrian laughed, feeling a little flirtier than he should.

The two brothers exchanged glances. “Very good.” The hint of a smile appeared on Lal’s mouth.

Adrian cleared his throat and ignored the jolt he felt in his cock. “So” -- he put the subject back on track -- “this ability to shift forms is hereditary.”

"I guess you could say that." Lal straightened with a sigh. "Some cats can't, but they're sentient regardless. Our other brother changes also. All three of us were born with a Second Nature."

"There're three of you." Adrian grinned. "Cool."

"Our kind is always born in threes," Lal explained. "That's just how it is."

"Is your other brother around too?"

Lal laughed, the bitterness in his voice clear. "I doubt it. That selfish asshole would never willingly come near this realm. Not when he's comfortable on someone's lap or between their legs." Caleb touched Lal's knee with a frown.

"It's true." Lal ignored his brother's silent warning. "I'm sure Kal didn't do or say anything to try and stop them from throwing you out." He bristled, eyes flashing. "Those bastards...!"

Furious, Lal trembled. Adrian could almost feel the intensity of the man's emotions. He patted Lal's other knee, hoping the touch would soothe or relax. "Take it easy," he said softly.

Lal's anger melted, and he appeared upset with himself now. He slouched forward again, sliding all the way off the couch to the floor. "I fucked up," he whispered, resting his head on Adrian's knee. "I ran away from our world, and Caleb was punished for it. They threw him out of the house and exiled him to this realm."

Realm? World? Adrian's eyes widened. "So you weren't kidding when you said you're not from around here."

"No." Lal shook his head without lifting it off Adrian's knee. "There are countless realms anchored to this earth, places where different peoples and beings live. I don't understand it all, but the Masters travel between them and talk about it sometimes. Life started in this world, did you know that?"

Adrian shook his head.

“All the other realms branched from this one,” Lal said. “Earth isn’t anywhere near as sophisticated or developed as some of the others, and the magic here is supposedly very, very weak. But when I ran, I thought this would be a good, inconspicuous place to start my own new life.”

“This ‘Master...’” Adrian ran his fingers through Lal’s hair. “He’s the one who put that collar on you.”

“We’re all supposed to be bound to a Master,” Lal whispered. “For the most part, we can be pretty valuable for what we do as slaves.”

“What?” Adrian stared, hardly believing his ears.

“We fuck.”

## Chapter Eight

Adrian swallowed. The concept of slaves and Masters... He shivered, pissed off and unnerved by what he was hearing. "For a realm that's supposed to be more sophisticated than this one, it doesn't sound like it." He looked over at Lal's brother, who was looking off to the side toward the kitchen. "I'm glad you're not stuck there anymore either, Caleb."

Caleb didn't reply or even look his way. Lal sat back, pulling away from Adrian's caresses, and touched Caleb's wrist.

"If it were up to him, he never would've left," Lal explained. Caleb offered him a weak smile. "The Master's son loves him -- genuine, real love. The kind I've always wanted. But owners aren't supposed to love their pets that way, and I know the Master was angry with Jaylen for it. And if the pets are flawed on top of that, the situation is even worse."

"Flawed?" Adrian couldn't help looking over Caleb, a blush spreading across his cheeks. If Caleb was supposed to be a sex slave, how could anyone find fault in his beauty? Almost identical to Lal, Caleb couldn't have a more attractive, toned body and seductively handsome face. "How?"

Lal blinked at Adrian, as if the answer should be obvious. "Caleb's deaf."

"What?" Adrian frowned, and it sank in.

A cat with solid white fur and blue eyes -- two physical traits heavily associated with hereditary deafness. Adrian might've cued into the common genetic disorder sooner if he hadn't been distracted.

"But he reads lips very well," Lal added, probably mistaking Adrian's silence.

"No, no." Adrian shook his head. "Being deaf isn't a 'defect,' and it shouldn't matter anyway. In this world, plenty of people have deaf or even blind cats and they love them just the same."

"You've never met anyone who prefers a more attentive cat who can respond to its name being called or the sound of the owner's voice?" Lal asked quietly.

Adrian looked down at the carpet. The shelter had housed a number of beautiful, sweet animals abandoned for similar enough reasons. And it always took the longest for those special pets to be adopted.

"Imagine not being able respond to a lover's commands or desires, missing those subtle hints in their voice that they're not being fully satisfied," Lal said. "In our situation, that makes us pretty worthless."

"I don't believe this." Adrian stared back and forth between the two brothers. "That's bullshit."

"That's how it's always been," Lal sighed.

"But that doesn't mean it's right." Adrian stood up and went into the bedroom for a second. He came back out with a T-shirt and a pair of the drawstring pants he'd bought with Lal earlier. He handed them to Caleb over the back of the sofa, who accepted the clothing with a curious look.

"You can wear those tonight," Adrian explained, resting against the backrest. "Tomorrow we'll hit the mall again and get you some more stuff, Caleb. Have you guys had anything to eat?"

"We're fine." Lal leaned back as Caleb slipped into the shirt. He met Adrian's gaze. "You're a good person, Adrian."

"Hey, it's nothing," Adrian said. He set his chin on the edge of the sofa, and added softly, "I'm just glad you came back."

Lal turned around, climbing halfway up onto the couch. His lips hovered over Adrian's, brushing ever so slightly across the skin when he spoke. "You know what they say about stray cats. Now you'll never be able to get rid of me."

Lal kissed him, a gentle meeting of their lips that ended in a soft sucking sound as they eased apart.

"Mmm," Adrian murmured, closing his eyes. "Thank God." Before he realized what was happening, Lal gripped him by the front of his shirt and pulled him over the back of the sofa.

"Hey!" he gasped, surprised.

Lal laughed. He had Adrian pressed down onto the couch, sprawled all over the cushions. One of Adrian's legs dangled over the side of the seat while the other was hooked on the backrest by his knee. Caleb sat between his legs, blue eyes narrowed into slits and a corner of those full lips curved up.

The same wicked Cheshire grin took up residence on Lal's mouth. "You're cute when you're surprised," he teased.

"Lal..." Adrian tried to sit up. But as he'd already discovered, being close to Lal made the muscles in his body very uncooperative. Only his cock jerked to attention, straining against the front of his normally loose, but now uncomfortably tight, lounge pants.

"We both want to thank you." Lal kissed the side of Adrian's neck, tickling the skin with fleeting nips. Caleb slipped his fingers under the elastic band at Adrian's waist and slowly pulled. Both pants and underwear rolled down over Adrian's abdomen, revealing the crest of dark curls above his groin. Caleb dipped down to brush his mouth over the hairs and tugged on them, making Adrian whimper.

“Easy, Caleb,” Lal murmured, briefly facing his brother. Caleb drew away from the curls, but continued to work the clothing past Adrian’s erection and off his legs.

Turning his attention back to Adrian, Lal chuckled. “You too,” he said playfully. “Relax.”

“It’s kind of” -- Adrian gulped -- “h-hard.”

“The harder the better.” Lal winked. He reached underneath Adrian’s T-shirt to find a taut nipple and rolled his thumb over the peak. Caleb used the same achingly slow rubbing motion over the swollen tip of Adrian’s cock. The combined pleasure had Adrian purring almost as loudly as any cat, including his quasi-feline companions.

Pulling the T-shirt completely off over Adrian’s head, Lal traced the tip of his tongue along the center of Adrian’s chest. The raspy texture rubbing against his naked skin now felt so good, the pleasure spreading up through his arms and down to his legs with each flick of that tongue.

That same coarse yet velvet caress swept up Adrian’s cock. He jerked up with a strangled cry, drops of sweat trickling into his eyes. Caleb’s mouth closed around the tip of Adrian’s cock for a quick suck. A jolt of pure erotic pleasure flowed through Adrian, urging another choked cry of delight to well in his throat.

“This feels so good,” Adrian panted.

Using leisurely strokes, Caleb lapped at the underside of Adrian’s penis. The touch was rough, wet, hot, and everything between. Adrian couldn’t believe the kind of whimpering noises he made.

Lal flashed him a mischievous grin. “Like I said, I told him everything about you.”

“Oh God.” Adrian gripped the cushions, his cock pulsing and balls pulled up tight against their nest of curls.

“The places you like to be touched...where you’re most sensitive...” Lal wrapped his lips around Adrian’s nipple, swirling his tongue over the nub. Simultaneously, Caleb dragged his tongue along the underside of Adrian’s cock with the same agonizing slowness.

The rush of pleasurable sensations slammed into Adrian, and he writhed underneath the brothers’ attentions. He moaned, tumbling toward his orgasm.

Lal faced Caleb, touched his chin. “Let me do it,” he whispered, just as short of breath as Adrian.

Caleb stopped laving the flushed and fully erect organ to bend forward and kiss Lal on the cheek, giving into his brother’s wish. The few moments of neglect while they repositioned themselves left Adrian’s cock aching to be touched. He lifted his hips off the couch with desire, his penis rising up into the air, which felt cold against his feverish skin. Caleb sank between Adrian’s legs, forcing his hips back down to the sofa, and sucked the heavy sac below the erection.

Kicking off his sandals, Lal mounted Adrian. He faced Adrian’s cock and took the length deep in his throat. The feel of that deliciously coarse but gentle tongue working back and forth along the sensitive skin drove Adrian almost to the edge. He squirmed under Lal, wordless sounds of pleasure rumbling in his chest.

Through eyes half-lidded with ecstasy, Adrian noticed the prominent bulge at the front of Lal’s jeans. He reached up to pull open the fly, and the full, perky cock within bounced free. Adrian wrapped his mouth around the thick shaft and sucked on it gently.

Now Lal cried out, his lips quivering against Adrian’s organ. The vibrations traveled up through Adrian’s shaft, a tendril of exquisite pleasure gripping him from the inside out. Both men slammed into their peak at the same moment, their bodies seized in the throes of an earth-shattering orgasm.

Adrian swallowed as much of the thick, salty cum as he could, loving the taste of Lal's climax as he emptied also. Adrian's cock twitched in the hot depths of his lover's mouth, and he sucked hard, desperate to take everything Lal had to release.

Jaw aching, Adrian stopped only when Lal released his cock. Panting and shaking, they crashed back onto the sofa in a heap. Adrian ran his hands over Lal's hips, so conscious of the heat of Lal's breath against his semihard cock.

"That was amazing." Adrian gulped, his lungs burning for air.

Lal managed a weak grunt, but Adrian could feel his lover's satisfaction in the constant purrs vibrating in Lal's chest. He smiled, sinking farther into the comfortable, drowsy haze of two hearts beating as one.

Shifting form in midmotion, Caleb climbed on top of Lal and left his rumpled shirt behind as he curled up on his brother's butt, looking like a very contented cat. His eyes were narrowed slivers of blue, his tongue flicking out over an equally tiny and rosy wedge of a nose. When Adrian brought his leg down from the back of the couch, his toes found the wet spot still warm with Caleb's ejaculation.

## Chapter Nine

Lounging on the sofa and wrapped in Adrian's arms, Lal dreamt. For the first time in more years than he could remember, his thoughts drifted back to the night he'd arrived at the Master's house. Warm, late summer drafts cut through the house with its tall open windows and doorways that rose from the floor to the very bottom of the ceiling. Dark curtains billowed in the breeze, revealing slivers of the twin moons on a star-dusted horizon outside.

Scared and shivering, he lay curled up in a tight ball, wrapped around his two equally frightened brothers. A bed of heavy blankets and cushions had been made for them in a corner of a large room, wedged between a massive wooden desk and the plaster wall. Strange books and bottles cluttered every surface and shelf; odd trinkets that glowed in the darkness lined the tops of bookcases.

Magic permeated the air, the perfume of the Masters, making Lal's nose itch, and he tensed. His brothers became alert also. Caleb pressed so close to Lal they felt each other's heartbeats, using touch to help sense anything his lack of hearing wouldn't be able to catch.

The smell of an unfamiliar cat filled the room, and a pair of amber eyes stared down at them from the top of the desk. A shadowed figure came around the furniture and knelt on the floor in front of Lal and his brothers.

“Don’t be afraid.”

The shadows pulled away, revealing the owner of the soft voice. A very young man, barely older than a child, with skin the same colorless white as Caleb’s fur. The same young man who’d found them in the glade, wrapped them in a blanket, and brought them here. His eyes were as black as nights without moonlight, but warm and kind.

He offered his hands to the kittens. It was Caleb who pressed forward, an unusually bold move, as he was the most cautious of the three. But he rubbed against the young man’s palm, purring as those long, graceful fingers scratched behind his ears and under his chin.

The cat on the desk shifted form, becoming a man with orange hair and a worried frown tugging down the corners of plump rose lips. “The Master won’t like more cats in His household.”

“They’re so young and have no mother. There’s no way they can survive out there.”

“But...”

“If you tell Him, I’ll have to get rid of them. Please don’t say anything, will you?” Jaylen pleaded.

The cat shook his head.

“Find me something for them to eat.” Jaylen turned back to the kittens, picking up Caleb.

“Yes, young Master.”

“My name is Jaylen,” the young man explained. He named all three kittens then, Lal remembered. Before that, they’d had no names. Later on, he learned that “Caleb” meant “loved one,” a beautiful name reflective of the feelings Jaylen would eventually have for the

cat. He'd shown kindness to all three kittens during those first few years together, spoiling them so it was hard for Lal to slip into his role as a slave in adulthood.

The dreams faded as Lal stirred awake. He rolled onto his side, finding himself in Adrian's arms as they both lay stretched out on the couch. And he loved being there.

Lal nuzzled the side of Adrian's neck, trailing kisses up along the warm, golden tan skin. He brushed his lips over the young man's cheek, the long black eyelashes, and down the bridge of his gently sloped nose. He slipped his fingers through the tousled strands of brown hair falling across Adrian's brow.

Like Jaylen, Adrian was kind and caring. But he offered his love so willingly, with an open heart. Even Jaylen had hesitated to love Caleb, worried over his father's reaction should the Master learn of the affair. Adrian didn't care about any of that, and he never looked at Lal as anything less than equal.

Caleb stretched out along the back of the sofa, dozing in the early morning hours. He met Lal's gaze and gave a hushed mew.

"Yes, he's very special," Lal whispered before turning back to Adrian and kissing him on the mouth.

"Mmm, it can't be morning already," Adrian murmured, smiling as the kiss drew him out of sleep. He wrapped his arms around Lal's waist.

"The sun won't be out for a little while yet," Lal replied softly. He drank in the warmth of the young man's tenderness, savoring the closeness he felt when Adrian placed a soft kiss on his cheek or swept a hand along his back.

"Ah," Lal purred, half asleep but totally content. He curved upward into those caresses, his body responding to the touch with complete enjoyment. Those hands! Adrian was ruthlessly good with them, always finding just the right way to stroke Lal.

Pure heaven.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hunger drove them off the couch. Lal rolled off Adrian when the sunlight creeping around the edges of the blinds became too bright to keep ignoring. He stepped over the pile of clothes on the floor, where his were mixed with Adrian's and Caleb's in a jumble of pants, shirts, and underwear.

Naked, Lal shuffled across the living room with a long, lazy yawn. He made his way to the kitchen where Caleb was also scrounging for food. Lal poked around in the refrigerator. Humans in this realm might've been clever enough to come up with a nonmagical way to keep food preserved, but what was the point if the dumb thing was going to be empty?

Lal groaned, closing the door on the bare shelves within the fridge.

By now, Adrian had also crawled off the couch and joined them in the kitchen. He was also naked, but too drowsy to notice or care. Once he fully woke up, he'd remember and probably rush to get dressed, since he always seemed a little shy about showing his body. Lal didn't understand why -- the lean, toned muscles were gorgeous, his sex plump, long, and perked, even at rest.

"Coffee?" Adrian asked with a muffled yawn. He set another machine on top of the counter beside the fridge to start percolating the strong brew.

"No thanks." Lal crinkled his nose.

"It's the only way to start the day." Adrian came up behind Lal, pulling him into a hug. The embrace melted into a kiss, a good long one that left them both breathless.

"Scratch that." Adrian grinned. "It's the second best way to start the day."

Aroused, Adrian's cock pushed against Lal's abdomen. Both men looked down at the rigid organ, a blush spreading over Adrian's penis at the same time the color rose to his face.

"That's an even better way to start," Lal teased. It was all he could do not to chuckle at the way Adrian's blush heated to a deep shade of crimson on both areas. Caleb sat at the small table across from them, laughing silently behind his hands.

Adrian cleared his throat. “Uh, I’ll be right back.” He slipped out of Lal’s arms and darted out of the kitchen.

Unable to hold back, Lal burst out laughing. The shyness really was sweet, another one of Adrian’s odd, human quirks that made him even more alluring.

The chime on the coffeemaker went off, signaling the drink was ready. The rich, heady aroma filled the kitchen, tickling Lal’s nose. He moved in for a closer look and eyed the black, potent-smelling stuff.

Humans really seemed to like it. While Lal had roamed the streets with the other strays in the city, he’d watched droves of people line up in front of shops that churned out gallons of coffee every hour.

Lal picked one of the mismatched mugs from the overhead cupboard and filled it the brim. Steam rose off the top of the opaque fluid, carrying the bitter odor straight into his nose.

“Bleagh.” He made a face and glanced back at Caleb. His brother raised an eyebrow, the voiceless gesture coming off as, “Don’t look at me -- I won’t drink it.”

“Fine.” Lal picked up the mug, defiant. If Adrian liked coffee, it had to be good.

He downed the whole cup in three swallows, just barely getting by without burning his tongue. A shudder passed through Lal as the drink hit his stomach, the taste strong, sour, and all manner of God-awful on his tongue.

“Adrian likes this shit?” Lal gagged. Then a second tremble washed over him, his eyes widening at the rush suddenly bursting through his system. Every muscle in his body started twitching, his eyes darting all over the room, and he just wanted to get moving. Right now. Anywhere.

“You guys want to come grocery shopping with me?” Adrian popped back into the kitchen, dressed in shorts and a red T-shirt.

“Yes.” Lal flung himself at Adrian and bounced up and down. “Let’s go.”

## Chapter Ten

Lal skipped the last five steps and landed at the foot of the stairs. He glanced around, taking in the sun-drenched parking lot and the apartment building's carefully tended landscaping. Adrian's landlord, Vasquez, crouched in front of the row of yellow flowers bordering the walkway to the right. He looked up, saw Lal, and frowned.

"Hi!" Lal shouted and waved.

The older man scowled in return and got back to tending the plants.

"Lal." Adrian came up behind him and tugged the back of his T-shirt, laughing. "Come on." He pulled Lal toward the parking lot, with Caleb coming up beside them. Unlike Lal, he appeared calm about their outing. He wore one of Adrian's short-sleeved plaid shirts over a pair of his brother's new jeans and passed as an ordinary human. Of course, his hair was a little unusual, being such a frosty white, and his eyes refracted the sunlight strangely at certain angles. The same thing probably happened with Lal's eyes, but he'd never noticed.

Adrian tugged on Lal's shirt again to get his attention. They cut through the parking lot, but didn't stop at Adrian's car.

"Aren't we going to drive?" Lal pointed.

“The market’s close.” Adrian chuckled, leading them out of the apartment building’s parking lot. “And I think you can use the walk.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Lal asked.

“You’re on a caffeine rush.” Adrian kept his hand on Lal’s shirt, this time stopping him from walking too far ahead. Caleb snickered, having caught most of their exchange by flanking Adrian’s side.

“Mmm, yeah. Coffee’s good.” Lal grinned, ignoring his brother’s smirks.

They walked about three blocks before coming up to a supermarket. Cars were packed in the lot, and a countless number of people filtered in and out of the large, one-story building’s entrance.

Adrian clicked his tongue. “I forgot this place gets pretty crowded on weekend mornings.”

Usually, Lal didn’t like crowds, but he was too hyper to feel uncomfortable. “I haven’t been inside a grocery yet,” he said, latching onto Adrian and Caleb and practically dragging them both toward the sliding doors.

So many different sights, smells, and sounds hit Lal’s senses when they walked in through the sliding doors that he couldn’t take it all in. Caleb stayed close, watching the people push past with shopping carts and screaming toddlers to disappear into the maze of shelves with fruits, vegetables, and other different kinds of food. Lal bounced impatiently on the balls of his feet while Adrian took a basket from the stack next to the door.

“Is that going to be big enough?” Lal scrunched his nose at the basket.

“I think so...” Adrian scratched the back of his head.

“Okay!” Lal grabbed Adrian’s elbow and Caleb’s wrist, pulling them into the thick of things.

“Slow down.” Adrian laughed, pulling to a stop in front of a rack of greens. “I need some peppers.”

Lal poked through the other vegetables on the palette, including cucumbers. Caleb picked up a particularly long one, snickering, and handed it over. Lal, in a wicked mood, tapped Adrian on the shoulder with the vegetable.

“How do you know which one of these to get?” he asked, keeping a straight face.

“You like cucumbers?” Adrian blinked innocently, not catching the setup.

“Definitely.” Lal nodded.

“I guess you look for one that isn’t soft anywhere.” Adrian felt up the long cylinder, squeezing along its circumference. Lal imagined those graceful fingertips gliding along his own flesh, a steady throb building between his legs. He pressed against Adrian.

“So I should look for one that’s nice and hard?” Lal’s hand dropped down to brush across the front of Adrian’s shorts.

“Definitely,” Adrian echoed, sucking in his breath. A hint of a blush rose under the skin on his cheeks. He dipped down, stealing a kiss from Lal right there in the middle of the grocery store. Everyone around them was too busy to notice, but that spontaneous little peck packed enough punch to leave Lal short of breath.

Adrian stepped away, flushed and laughing as he carried the shopping basket over the front of his shorts. Lal glanced down at his own crotch, realizing he didn’t have any cover for his own body’s response.

Caleb came to the rescue and dumped a watermelon in Lal’s arms. His amused expression said, “That’s what you get for trying to tease.”

“It was worth it.” Lal winked. He lugged the piece of fruit over the bulge at the front of his pants as the two brothers followed Adrian.

Adrian bypassed the seafood counter and stopped at the next department. Rows of raw meat were lined up behind the glass, pink and fresh, making Lal’s stomach growl. He tossed the watermelon aside to crouch in front of the display, leaving Caleb to catch the fruit before it landed on a stack of disposable turkey pans on sale next to the counter.

"Was he like this as a kitten?" Adrian asked dryly. Caleb rolled his eyes and nodded.

"Who's next in line?" A man in a stained apron appeared on the other side of the counter.

"We are." Lal hopped up.

"Actually..." Adrian cleared his throat. Next to the trio, a middle-aged woman with a shopping cart full of bags of charcoal glared at them. "I think this lady was here first."

"What do you want?" The man ignored Adrian as he fit on a pair of gloves.

"Chicken liver," Lal said, practically drooling. "At least ten pounds."

"But --" Adrian tried to interrupt.

"I have a case in the back with twelve pounds," the man grunted.

"We'll take it all." Lal grinned.

Adrian sighed. "No more coffee in the morning. Ever again."

\* \* \* \* \*

Lal carried the case of meat home, anxious for lunch. Caleb walked next to him, with the watermelon on one shoulder and a twelve-pack of strawberry soda in the other hand. They reached the end of the sidewalk at the entrance to the apartment building, climbed up to the second floor, and stopped on the landing to wait for Adrian, who trailed a few steps behind, carrying the rest of the groceries in his arms while trying to get a bag of sesame seed candy open with his teeth.

"Wait until we get inside." Lal laughed.

"But I almost got it," Adrian said, voice muffled by the wad of plastic wrapper in his mouth. Lal joined him just in time to catch the bag of candy on top of his box when it fell.

"Thanks." Adrian grinned, a piece of the candy hanging from the corner of his mouth.

"Try some, it's good."

Ignoring the open bag, Lal took a bite of the chewy treat straight from Adrian's mouth. He flicked his tongue over Adrian's lips, enjoying the sweetness mixed with his lover's flavor. "You taste even better," he murmured and leaned in for another kiss. He couldn't enough of Adrian and loved him even more each time they touched.

Adrian moved them closer to the apartment door without breaking their contact. Pressed between the wood and Adrian, Lal felt breathless and very horny with an erection forming between his legs. Caleb set the soda down on the floor and reached a hand into Adrian's pocket for the keys to unlock the door.

Adrian and Lal tumbled in, their kiss ending in a clumsy struggle to keep their balance. Closing up behind them, Caleb headed into the kitchen with his groceries in hand and a coy grin on his lips.

"At this rate, we won't make it through dinner," Adrian laughed, panting as he adjusted the jostled grocery bags in his arms. He followed Caleb into the kitchen with Lal close behind.

Last through dinner? Lal really didn't want to wait that long. Dumping his box on the counter beside the shopping bags, he pulled Adrian to him.

"I think we should work up more of an appetite before eating," Lal suggested in a throaty whisper, his cock throbbing. He glanced down, and the sight of the bulge pushing against the fly of Adrian's shorts triggered another wave of desire. "Or skip the meal altogether."

"We'll have a late dinner," Adrian agreed, his voice deepening with the same lust Lal felt coursing under his skin like an electric current.

"It's a plan," Lal purred, eager to feel Adrian's hands all over his body and ease the desire making his flesh itch. He started dragging Adrian out of the kitchen, but lurched to a stop in the doorway.

A deep, penetrating chill that had nothing to do with the temperature of the room seeped into Lal's bones. He shivered, his desire for playful sex vanishing instantly. In the corner of the living room, shadows darkened and gathered together, and Lal started to shake all over, his feet glued to the floor.

They'd found him.

Adrian bumped into Lal from behind. His smile faltered when he saw Lal's expression. "Hey, are you okay?" He didn't notice the swirling pool of darkness rolling toward them or sense the cold, his eyes and attention only on his lover.

"Lal?" Adrian slipped an arm around Lal's shoulders. He finally followed Lal's stare and gave a start.

"What the hell!" Adrian's hold on Lal tightened in reflex. A good thing, since Lal felt his own knees threaten to go out, his instinct to change into his Second Nature and run almost taking over. Adrian held him close, protective in spite of the alarm reflected in his expression, as they watched the strange, ominous shape take form before them. He pulled Lal back into the kitchen as the shadows formed the outline of a man, wispy, living tendrils of darkness sweeping across the floor with each step it took toward them.

"Shit," Adrian gasped. "What is that thing?"

The last of Lal's courage dissolved. It didn't matter how much Adrian wanted to try to keep him safe. He could feel the collar tightening around his throat again, feel himself being dragged back to the House in shame, chained.

Before thinking twice, Lal was on the floor in cat form, darting out of the pile of clothes that fell away from his human body. He made a dash for the kitchen doorway, desperate to make it past the being in the shadow before it could catch him.

A voice drifted from the pool of darkness, breathy but deep enough to suggest the owner was male. "You would run from him so easily."

The power in those words sent a different kind of shiver through Lal, but he recognized the softness in that voice. Lal's paws slipped on the linoleum, and he skidded to a stop at the entrance to the kitchen.

"Come back here, Lal. Please." The stranger's voice deepened. "Don't run away again."

Lal couldn't move. He managed to shift back to human form, but stayed crouched on his hands and knees, feeling a mixture of relief and shame.

"What do you want?" Adrian demanded. His hand tightened on the back of a chair at the small bistro set in the middle of the kitchen, like he intended to use it as a weapon if he had to. His bravery made Lal feel worse for having tried to run. Even with this stranger towering a good seven or eight inches above him, Adrian didn't back down.

"It's all right, Adrian," Lal called out softly.

"The hell it is! Who are you?" Adrian clenched his jaw and stared at the intruder.

"A friend." The shadows pulled away to reveal the Master's son, his dark eyes haunted with a melancholy light that dulled the glow of his unnaturally pale, off-white skin. A frown settled on his bowed lips, the expression one of disappointment, not anger.

"Jaylen." Lal swallowed. Adrian's eyes widened as he recognized the name, and his mouth moved like he was about to say something. He turned to Lal, who avoided his gaze.

"I -- I didn't know it was you at first," Lal confessed to Jaylen. He looked down at his hands spread open on the vinyl flooring, and his voice dropped to a whisper that his own sensitive hearing had trouble picking up over the sound of his hammering heartbeat. "I thought it was the Master."

A darker expression flickered across Jaylen's porcelain face, a crease marring the smooth skin of his brow. "It's not a pleasant thought to imagine I resemble him that much."

"That's not what I was trying to say." Lal bit down on his lower lip until it hurt. "I was...afraid."

“There’s no shame in fear,” Jaylen whispered. “Only in cowardice.” He looked toward the counter where Caleb stood. The young man had his back turned to them, oblivious to everything that went on around him as he unpacked the grocery bags and arranged things haphazardly in the cabinets.

Jaylen’s gaze swept back to Adrian. “You’re their new Master.”

“What?” Adrian stared.

In the doorway, Lal’s breath caught in his throat. He stared at Adrian, his heart pounding harder still. This sounded like another test. Maybe Jaylen was here to take him out of this realm anyway.

Claim me, Adrian, Lal pleaded silently. The Masters stayed out of human affairs, so there was a chance Lal could stay if this man owned him. That’s what he wanted more than anything -- to stay with Adrian. Lal cursed himself for running, for being scared in the first place.

He should never have left Adrian’s side.

“Do you claim them?” Jaylen asked.

“He does,” Lal replied. “We’re both his pets.”

“No, I don’t.” Adrian set his jaw again. He looked Jaylen in the eye. “I’m not their ‘Master.’ They don’t belong to anyone, not anymore or ever again.”

“That’s only a half truth.” Jaylen’s lips curved up in another sad smile. “Lal does belong to you, but you also to him. You each carry the other’s scent on your skin, and it’s clear you care for him.”

Adrian’s hand slipped off the edge of the chair, his expression softening. “More than you might realize.”

“I know exactly how much,” Jaylen replied softly. Full of longing, his gaze returned to Caleb.

Finally noticing that something had changed in the kitchen, Caleb froze. His other senses were sharp enough that he should've picked up his lover's presence, especially the scent of his magic -- a provocative but nameless aroma, like the smell of an approaching lightning storm or the first numbing frost of winter. But Lal hadn't noticed the magic either, not before Jaylen made himself visible, and he realized the sorcerer had blocked their perceptions until now.

Glancing over his shoulder, Caleb's eyes widened. A coffee mug slipped through his hand to crack apart on the floor, bits of glass grinding under his sandals as he crossed the room. Silently, he threw himself into Jaylen's arms.

"I've missed you so much," Jaylen whispered, cradling the back of Caleb's head with one hand. The other rubbed across Caleb's back and drew him closer still, their bodies one joined form. Caleb responded with a series of kisses along Jaylen's neck and throat. They clung to each other, for a while lost in their love.

A few minutes passed before Jaylen rested the top of his chin on Caleb's head. "Keep them both safe for me, Adrian."

Before Adrian could respond, Lal straightened. "You're leaving, Jaylen?"

"I can't stay."

"You can't go," Lal countered, his voice cracking. "You can't leave Caleb."

Jaylen's voice dropped to a throaty whisper. "He's been exiled to this realm, and I'm already going against my father's wishes by being here now."

"Fuck the rules!" Lal's hands balled in to fists. His nails hooked into the skin of his palms, the sting nothing compared to the pain in his heart. "He's been waiting for you to come for him, and you're just going to go? There are thousands of realms -- pick one for the both of you and run."

"It's not as easy as that for everyone, Lal." Jaylen sighed. "As much as I wanted to, I couldn't even stop him from sending Caleb away."

"That's bullshit!" Lal pressed against the edge of the doorway, his chest heaving. "Are you that afraid the Master might punish you for leaving?"

"Maybe I'm already being punished for feeling the way I do." Jaylen frowned. He pulled away from Caleb, their bodies separating into two individual forms again. "Love is a mortal condition."

"Now you do sound like the Master," Lal said, feeling bitter.

"I'm his son." Jaylen cupped Caleb's chin. "I have no choice."

"Everyone has a choice." Adrian furrowed his brow. "I don't understand why things have to be the way they are in your world."

"Because you're not a coward." Jaylen's hand fell away from Caleb's chin, the shadows deepening on his face. "Just now, you would've done anything to protect Lal and the love you share. Put to the test in a similar way, I did anything to avoid making my father angry."

"But, why?" Lal knew none of this made sense to Adrian, and the longer he spent in this realm the less he understood it either. "Isn't Caleb's love worth fighting for?"

"Yes, but it's the fighter who has no worth." Jaylen turned to leave. Caleb's hand darted out, grabbing Jaylen's elbow.

"Don't go," he whispered. His voice sounded faint and dry from being used so rarely, like leaves skittering across the pavement. But a clap of thunder couldn't have commanded more attention from everyone in the room.

Turning, Jaylen swept Caleb into another embrace. Their mouths joined in a kiss, their bodies melting slowly together.

Adrian bent down and picked up the clothes piled at his feet before moving around the couple and joining Lal at the doorway. "Let's leave them alone for a while, okay?" he asked softly.

With a nod, Lal followed him out into the living room. He slipped his arms around Adrian's waist and brushed his lips across the curve of his neck.

“Jaylen’s right.” Adrian placed his free hand over Lal’s, stroking the skin with so much tenderness. “I love you.”

Lal rested his forehead on the nape of Adrian’s neck, feeling that same love for Adrian in each beat of his own heart.

## Chapter Eleven

After Lal dressed, they left the apartment to give Jaylen and Caleb some privacy. Adrian drove them to a café he knew that was near the animal shelter. People -- families, friends, couples, lovers -- had the restaurant packed, their laughter and cheerful conversation drowning out the Beatles song playing in the background. They sat side by side in a booth near the entrance, picking at some sandwiches and nursing their iced teas. Neither of them had much of an appetite after all.

Lal had the window seat and quietly watched the traffic roll past. His reflection in the tinted glass looked worried, mouth set in a thin line. He noticed Adrian looking at him and sighed.

“Told you I fucked everything up.”

“Don’t say that.” Adrian slipped an arm around Lal’s shoulder. “Jaylen will make the right choice, I know it.”

“He really loves Caleb.” Lal leaned in toward him. “But he’s supposed to be everything the Master is, as his heir. There are things he shouldn’t do.”

“Like be happy?” Adrian shook his head.

“More or less.” Lal smiled dryly. “Finding love with a ‘lesser being’ like one of us would seriously piss off the Master. He’d hate to see any weakness in Jaylen.”

“What’s the worst he could do?”

“Banish him...to someplace worse.” Lal shivered. “There are realms no one ever wants to set foot in because it’s as close to hell as possible without actually crossing into the underworld. And there’s no way out.”

“I hope you’re being dramatic.” Adrian swallowed.

“Wish I was.”

“Damn,” Adrian cursed under his breath. “Jaylen seems pretty powerful himself, though.”

“He is, but he’s always been different from the others. Jaylen’s special like you are, just scared that he’ll fail, so he doesn’t take a chance.”

“I’m not so special.” Adrian pressed his cheek on Lal’s head. “Just lucky for having you.”

“So this is really why you skipped coming down to the shelter today,” joked a man who stopped at their table on the way out.

Adrian looked up, recognizing his friend’s voice. “Hi, Marty.” He nodded toward the bench across from them. “Want to join us for a while?”

“Not for too long.” Marty dropped into the booth, setting his to-go bag on the table. “I just came for a quick bite on the way to the shelter. Plus, I don’t want to interrupt anything.”

“It’s okay. We were going to head home soon anyway.”

“Is that right?” Marty asked with curiosity.

“We’re living together.” Adrian felt the heat rise to his cheeks as the words came out.

“Cool. A new roommate from the university?”

“We’re sharing more than a room,” Lal said.

“Oh.” Marty’s eyes widened. “Oh.” He gave Adrian a “when-did-that-happen” look.

Adrian made introductions, more for Marty’s benefit since Lal had already met him back at the shelter.

When Marty shook Lal’s hand, he smiled. “Pretty name.”

“Thanks.” Lal added dryly, “And it’s a male name, so hopefully you won’t get confused this time.” Adrian couldn’t keep himself from chuckling.

Smirking, Marty raised an eyebrow at Lal. “Trust me, there’s no doubt you’re a man.”

“Good, because I don’t want you trying to feel up my ass to find my testicles again.”

The expression on Marty’s face was priceless. Adrian laughed so hard his side ached, and he grabbed Lal’s shoulder. “You mean he --?”

“Yes.” Lal rolled his eyes.

“And he couldn’t tell?”

“No.” Lal snickered.

“But you told me you didn’t get a chance to check his sex,” Adrian said, turning to Marty. He pictured his friend feeling around under Lal’s tail, and couldn’t stop laughing to catch his breath. That explained another reason why Lal had been grumpy in the kennel. Adrian pointed at Marty. “No wonder you almost got bitten!”

Marty turned red, but denied everything. “Okay, I have no idea what I’m doing to make you both crack up, but these are the first smiles I’ve seen on you two since I walked in here.” He stole Adrian’s iced tea and took a sip. “Glad I could help cheer you up after the news.”

“What news?” Adrian’s laughter faded.

“About the clinic down the road...” Marty set the tea down when he saw Adrian’s puzzled look. “I left three messages on your cell, and for sure they’ve been trying to call you.”

Adrian had left his phone at the apartment all day, forgotten. “The clinic I work at?” He had a sinking feeling in his gut.

Marty gave him a grim nod. “There was some trouble with vandals.”

“Shit.” Adrian leaned back in the booth, his hands raking through his hair. “When?”

“Late last night or really early this morning,” Marty said. “They really tore up the place.”

“Why would anyone do that?” Lal asked, a hint of a growl in his voice.

“Just pure destructive behavior,” Marty replied. “They didn’t steal anything, as far as Dr. Brown noticed. He came by the shelter to borrow some stuff to start cleaning up tomorrow.”

Crushed, Adrian sank low in his seat. “I’m ready to give up on the human race, Marty.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to ruin the rest of the evening for you two,” Marty apologized.

“It’s been a weird day already,” Adrian sighed.

“And it’s not over yet.” Lal rested both elbows on the table.

Marty slid out of the booth, rubbing the back of his neck. “Let’s get out for drinks later,” he invited them. “There’s that place up the street with the dollar draft specials. I’ll meet you both after I close up the shelter in an hour.”

“Is that okay?” Adrian asked Lal.

“Sure.”

“Then it’s a date.” Marty clapped Adrian on the shoulder as he walked past. “See you guys.”

## Chapter Twelve

On his way in, Marty held the door for a mom and daughter leaving the shelter. The little girl had a puppy in her arms, wrapped in a towel. “Enjoy your new family.” He waved, watching the trio head off with smiles.

Louisa, the other volunteer working the weekend shift, met him at the door. “Thank God you’re back,” she said.

“Someone’s hungry,” he joked while offering her the takeout he’d brought back from the café.

“It’s not that.” She pursed her lips and jerked her thumb in the direction of the shelter’s lobby. “I’m not sure what to do with this guy inside.”

The shelter had the rooms with the kennels set up behind the reception area and ministore that had a few shelves with food, dishes, flea collars, and other pet essentials. A tall, brawny guy dressed in dark clothes hunched in front of the kennels, ducking his head to look into each one from under the drawn hood of his sweatshirt. Usually the animals got excited when someone was nearby, but Marty didn’t hear so much as a stray bark from the dogs occupying the cubbies. Not even they knew what to make of the stranger.

“What’s his deal?” Marty asked.

"I have no idea." Louisa lowered her voice and glanced over her shoulder. She shoved her glasses higher up on the bridge of her freckle-splattered nose. "But he's creeping me out."

The guy really had her on edge. "I'll take care of it," Marty assured her as he left his jacket and car keys behind the receptionist's station.

"Thanks." She looked relieved and ducked behind the desk.

Marty headed over, still trying to gauge the man. Most of the shelter's visitors were families like the mom and daughter who'd just left, or people who came in with friends looking to adopt a new pet. This guy didn't even seem interested in the animals -- he moved from one kennel to the next, taking a quick look inside and...sniffing the air?

As Marty came up beside him, he realized why the dogs were so quiet. The ones who didn't have their tails tucked between their legs in the back of their kennels were crouched in defensive stances. The hair on the back of their necks stood on end while they bared their teeth Cujo-style.

"Can you step away from the kennels, please?" Marty folded his arms across his chest.

The man stopped sniffing. He hooked his fingers through the bars on the kennel door next to him, the skin along the knuckles rough and calloused, nails long and almost clawlike. When he talked, the sound came out more like a growl than a man's voice. "These are all the animals."

"Central Zoo down in Orlando has a bigger variety," Marty replied. Everything about this guy rubbed Marty the wrong way. Louisa had him pegged, all right, with the "creepy" description.

The man straightened. If he looked big before, he was a fucking giant up close. He towered over Marty, only a foot and a few inches from touching the nine-foot ceiling. Long coils of wiry, reddish hair spilled out from under his hood, the expression on his blocky face set in a snarl. He had a black cat tucked under one of his thick, brawny arms, which added more strangeness to his appearance.

"I'm looking for the cat," the man rumbled.

"You'll have to come back tomorrow," Marty said. "We're closing up in a little while and can't arrange any more adoptions." Like hell I'd let you walk out of here with another animal, he thought. Who knew what the guy did to cats -- he didn't look like an animal lover as much as he did some kind of predator or something.

"I want the cat." The man bared his teeth. The tips looked like they'd been filed into points. "The black and white one. That used to be there." He pointed a long-nailed finger toward the empty cubby space at the far end of the row.

"What?" Marty stared and felt his jaw drop open. This guy was the real owner of the cat Adrian had taken home? How else would he know the animal's description, especially since the lost pet bulletin had never gone out to the other shelters or clinics nearby? But how did the man know what kennel had housed the cat and where? Marty clamped his mouth shut as the man's eyes narrowed into dangerous slits.

"You know him. It's in your face." The man took a step forward. "Where is he?"

"Right now, the cat is being looked after by a veterinarian and isn't here." Marty glared, bristling at the other man's aggressive posture. Whatever the hell was going on, he didn't trust this guy at all. "And if you want to claim the animal, you'll need to come back with proof of ownership before he can be released."

"The fuck I will," the man roared. He grabbed the front of Marty's shirt, yanking him forward. "Where is he? Now!"

"Back off!" Marty shouted.

Without warning, the black cat darted out of the weird man's hold and slashed at his hand. He cried out in anger and pain, releasing Marty.

"Fuck," the man snarled and clutched at the bleeding gashes. The cat stood beside him, ears back and tail twitching like it would attack again. When the man stepped back from Marty, the cat jumped back up into his arms.

“Get the hell out of here,” Marty panted, hands balled into fists. “Before I call the cops to haul your ass into jail.”

The man growled, his chest heaving with fury. But he rammed past Marty and headed for the exit, slamming the door on the way out. In the silence that followed, the dogs started to whine.

“Holy shit.” Marty let out a long puff of air and leaned back against one of the kennels. The pup inside started licking the back of his hand with nervous flicks of the tongue.

“Are you okay?” Louisa asked from the other room. Her voice trembled, and she had the telephone receiver in hand. “I was going to call the police anyway.”

Marty nodded. “Go ahead, that asshole is trouble.” He thought about Adrian’s clinic having been vandalized, and it didn’t seem like a farfetched idea that someone like that maniac would be involved. Jesus, Adrian! He had to get a hold of his friend and warn him about the cat’s owner.

\* \* \* \* \*

“You little shit,” Lor roared.

A few blocks away from the shelter, he paced back and forth in an empty alley where dusk had already left the solitary area in shadows. He smashed a fist into the Dumpster, venting his wrath on the defenseless object. Bellowing again, he knocked the whole thing onto its side with a loud crash. “I should kill you for that!”

“Like you would’ve killed that man?” Kal watched from a safe distance, balanced on the railing of a rusty fire escape. His hands tightened around the tarnished metal. “You almost fucked this up for both of us.”

“I kill who I want.” Lor whipped around, his chest heaving. “Don’t ever tell me what to do.”

“You’re a fool with a useless nose,” Kal spat. He didn’t care how pissed off the truth made this lumbering oaf, not when they were so close to getting this done. “The man was covered in Lal’s scent.” Along with that of another person he’d touched. A male, whose smell mixed evenly with Lal’s. Kal suspected that one was the veterinarian taking care of his brother.

“Then I should’ve beaten the answer out of him.” Lor lapped at the wound that wouldn’t stop bleeding. Kal had cut deeper than he’d needed to and didn’t regret causing the big cat pain.

“He’d be dead now, and we still wouldn’t know where to find Lal.” Kal narrowed his eyes. “And the law of this world would be hunting you for it.” Like the animal you are, he added silently.

“You think you’re so clever. All you can do is fuck. Is that how you wanted to get the answer?” He barked with laughter. “Drop to your knees right there and suck his human cock until he moans it?”

Kal bared his own fangs. “We’re going to follow him until he leads us to this veterinarian Lal is with.”

The answer silenced Lor. He thought it over, brow furrowed in concentration. “You are clever,” he admitted with a soft growl. “Very clever.”

## Chapter Thirteen

Adrian pulled up in front of the club. On Sunday nights only the bar was open, and since it was already close to nine-thirty, the parking lot didn't have too many cars. As he turned off the ignition, a couple walked out of the entrance, stopping for a kiss under the club's blue sign. He watched them for a minute or two, then reached over to take Lal's hand.

During the rest of their dinner and the drive over, they hadn't talked much. But the silence wasn't tense or moody, just thoughtful after the day's events. Lal didn't say anything now as he leaned over and touched their mouths together. Adrian invited the kiss to deepen, welcoming the slow, sultry movements of Lal's lips as he sucked on the soft flesh.

They gradually separated, and Adrian gave Lal's hand another squeeze. "Want to go home instead?"

"I'm hoping if we give them enough time, Jaylen will have gone with Caleb," Lal admitted. The corner of his mouth twitched. "And I like teasing your friend."

"He deserves it sometimes." Adrian laughed and pulled the car keys from the ignition.

Inside the club, they took a seat at the bar with its polished black top and waist-high stools. The parking lot might've been only half full, but most of the booths and tables were filled with couples sipping drinks or groups of friends enjoying each other's company. The

atmosphere felt romantic, with soft lighting and easy music in the backdrop, and Lal picked up on the vibe. He slid his seat closer so he could rest his chin on Adrian's shoulder while the bartender poured out two beers for them.

"Smells sour." Lal crinkled his nose at the drink before setting it back down on the counter. "Is this like coffee?"

"No." Adrian chuckled. "It'll do the opposite of what coffee does, actually."

Lal made a face. "I'll save that for Marty." He nuzzled the side of Adrian's neck, kissing the skin along his collar.

They both jumped when Marty appeared behind them. He took Lal's beer and helped himself to a long swallow as he dropped into the seat next to Adrian.

"You're welcome," Lal said dryly.

Ignoring the playful sarcasm, Marty set the glass on the bar top. "I'm late because the weirdest shit happened. You know that cat you took home? The owner came by the shelter."

Adrian exchanged a glance with Lal, who straightened up, his posture tense. "What did he look like?" Lal gripped the edge of the bar tight enough to turn his knuckles white.

"A big, nasty mother," Marty said. "And he has to be insane. When he started asking about the cat and I didn't give enough information, he busted a fuse."

Beside Adrian, Lal cursed. "They know I'm near here." He swallowed loudly.

"This time the guy isn't a friend, is he?" Adrian asked.

"No' isn't a strong enough word." Lal twisted a napkin in his hand, shredding the paper. He looked up at Adrian, his lips set in a thin line. "If I stay, they'll find me."

"Then we won't stay." Adrian squared his jaw.

Lal's eyes widened. "You can't...you're in school, you have a job, friends. A life."

"One that's empty without you." Adrian shook his head and bit down on his lower lip. "I'm not losing you."

Wrapping his arms around him, Lal buried his face in Adrian's chest. Adrian held him closely in the tight embrace.

"Okay, what the hell is going on?" Marty leaned forward. He glanced from Lal to Adrian. "Talk to me."

"You wouldn't believe it." Adrian frowned at his longtime friend.

"Give me the benefit of the doubt." Marty raised a brow. "I almost got in a fight with that asshole back at the shelter over this, and I at least deserve to know why."

"Because I'm the cat Adrian took home." Lal came right out and said it, breaking away from the hug.

Marty sat back with a pissed look. "This is serious."

"So am I," Lal replied.

"I told you it was hard to believe." Adrian reached for his wallet and set some cash on the bar. "Just forget it, Marty. We have to go."

None of them paid attention to the man who slipped onto the stool beside Lal.

"Are you fucking both these men, Lal? Or just the one with the dark hair and pretty mouth, saying all those sweet things?"

Sucking in his breath, Lal whipped around. Adrian tensed in his seat, straightening up to get a look at the man who'd spoken.

There was no mistaking the stranger's identity, with his piercing, cobalt blue eyes and a face that could've passed as a carbon copy of Lal's or Caleb's. The only apparent difference from his brothers was the raven black hair cutting across his face in sharp, shoulder-length sections. He had on the same black shirt and pants as the man who'd made out with his girlfriend outside of the club, only they hung looser on his smaller, more toned frame. A collar glinted at his throat, and the way he narrowed his eyes at Lal told Adrian that no obvious brotherly love was shared between them.

“What are you doing here, Kal?” Lal gripped Adrian’s sleeve, his nails prickling through the jacket.

Kal’s gaze flicked over Adrian. “His scent is all over you. Inside of you.”

“Stay the hell away from us.” Lal shoved away from the bar, baring his teeth.

“That’s not how it is.” Kal yanked on the chain at his throat, bringing the silver collar forward. “See this? Because you ran off to this shithole to suck human cock, I’ve been paying the price.”

Other people at the bar were staring, including Marty, but Adrian hardly noticed. The tension between the two brothers was escalating fast, and he had a bad idea where this was heading. He stood up and touched Lal’s shoulder. “We should go.”

“Yes, we should.” Kal also got to his feet. “Say goodbye to your lover, because you’re coming back with me to our realm where we belong.”

“Fuck you.” Lal shoved Kal back against the bar. “I belong here. Find another way to kiss ass and gain favor with the Master.”

Slipping through Lal’s grip, Kal jumped up to crouch on the bar top. “Headstrong brat,” he seethed. “I was trying to make this simple.”

Lal moved as if to punch him. Stepping in, Adrian caught his elbow. “Forget what he says; he’s just trying to egg you on. Let’s just leave --”

Someone grabbed the back of Adrian’s jacket and lifted him off the ground. “Enough of this,” a man snarled in Adrian’s ear.

“Hey, get off him!” Marty yelled. He tackled the guy from behind, but his blow didn’t faze the giant. He tossed Adrian at Marty, and both men landed against the edge of the bar. Drink glasses and bottles on the counter toppled over, shattering as they rolled to the hard floor. In the same motion, the guy took hold of Lal by the scruff of the neck and yanked him backward.

"You're coming with us, you little fuck," his voice rumbled. "One way or another." He pulled out a long chain and made a loop to fit over Lal's head.

"Watch it, Lor," Kal warned. "Don't hurt him."

"Shut up," Lor barked. "I'll do what I have to."

"The hell you will!" Lal shifted form. Suddenly, his neck was too small for the grip Lor had on him, and he dropped down to the floor along with his clothes.

Roaring loud enough to rattle the glass shelves behind the bar, Lor tore through the pile of clothing. Lal darted out, too fast on his paws to get caught, and slashed at Lor's face. He drew blood, and the man screamed in fury.

Adrian didn't think twice. While Lor was distracted, he took one of the barstools and smashed it over the guy's head. Stunned from the blow, Lor stopped yelling. But he was still conscious and pissed. *Very* pissed.

"You fuck." Lor turned toward Adrian, one eye smoldering while blood oozed from the jagged claw wounds over the other. His voice dropped an octave, deep enough to make Adrian's eardrums vibrate from the bass. "I'll tear you apart." While he talked, he doubled over. His body lengthened and muscles bulged, ripping out of the clothes as he shifted form.

"What. The. Fuck," Marty gasped.

Adrian swallowed. Lor had changed into something that looked like all the big cats combined -- black stripes running down his torso on tan and white fur, a thick crimson mane of wiry hair shielding the neck and back. And teeth -- there were rows of sharp, pointed and curved fangs set in a massive jaw with muscles designed to rend and tear. People in the club started screaming and raced for the exit.

"Run, fool." Kal shoved Adrian away from the bar. "You're the one he wants to kill."

"Adrian, come on!" Lal was at his side, bending down to scoop his clothes from the floor as he pulled Adrian toward the back of the room. They moved in the opposite direction of the other fleeing customers, who were running from the giant, snarling monster cat. The

two men shoved through the double doors leading to the storeroom area, and Adrian spun around to slip the bolt into place. Lor rammed against the entrance with a roar, and everything in the building seemed to quake. But the doors held up against the first blow.

"He's still dazed, otherwise he'd have torn through the wall," Lal panted, stepping into his pants and yanking them over his narrow hips.

"Oh God." Adrian ran a hand through his hair.

"Hurry." Lal pressed forward with Adrian in tow. In the dark storeroom, Adrian had trouble seeing more than two feet ahead of them, and he relied on Lal to guide them. "There's a service door up ahead."

Another pound came from the doors, and Lal started running. He found the other exit and twisted the knob until it gave. They both stumbled out into the night behind the club, and cut around the side of the building to get to the car while Lor was preoccupied trying to break into the storeroom.

Everyone else had cleared out of the area. Police sirens sounded in the distance, getting closer. Adrian had his keys in hand before they reached the car, and they both jumped in.

The club's front doors smashed open, and Lor burst out in a shower of glass and wood. He landed on the concrete right in front of them, roaring as he gnashed his teeth. He sprang forward, straight at them.

"Shit!" Adrian yelled. He slammed his foot on the gas pedal and peeled out of the lot in reverse. Going right over the curb, he heard the screech of tires as a car coming up the street slammed on the brakes to avoid hitting them. Adrian cut the wheel around and changed gears as the other driver shouted a few curses at them. Those changed into a cry of, "Holy fuck!" as Lor barreled out into the street a second later. The huge cat rammed against the car, and the hit sent Adrian headfirst into the steering wheel, like they'd been rear-ended by a truck.

“Faster, Adrian.” Lal turned around in the passenger seat to watch out the rear window. The few other cars on the road swerved out of the way or slammed into their brakes, the stunned drivers gawking at Lor. A few students on the sidewalk screamed and tried to take pictures with their phone cameras while running for safety. “Make this thing go faster.”

“I can’t, it’s a fucking Geo!” Adrian had the pedal mashed against the floor, his head buzzing from the smack to his forehead.

Lor hit them again, and they lurched forward with a loud bang. The steering wobbled in Adrian’s hand; the rear left tire was out. The transmission finally kicked in, and they broke away from Lor. Adrian got up to fifty as the street emptied out, before a grinding sound started that warned he was tearing up the rim of his mutilated tire.

“We’re not going to get far like this.” He wiped a trickle of blood out of his eye.

“We can’t stop,” Lal said.

At the end of the block, Adrian wrenched the wheel and screeched around the corner. The animal shelter came up on his right, and he tore into the parking lot. He hit the brakes a few feet from the entrance.

Lal panicked. “Adrian, what are you doing?”

“Trust me.” He leaned over, taking both sides of Lal’s face in his hands and kissing him hard. Bolting from the car, Adrian ran up the steps to the door and tried to fit the right key in the lock with shaking hands. No sooner had he opened it than Lor came racing at full speed from the end of the parking lot.

Running inside, Adrian headed straight toward the back room. The animals started barking and making a fuss in their cages as he sprinted past. He skidded to a stop in front of the cabinet with all the veterinary medicines and supplies. With his keys still in the lock at the entrance, he had to break through the glass with his bare fist. At the back of the shelf, there was a bundle of premeasured tranquilizers used for the large and dangerous creatures that animal control sometimes picked up. While Lor wasn’t an alligator or endangered

panther that needed to be relocated to a conservation reserve, there were enough sedatives in the darts to take out an elephant.

Adrian whipped around just as Lor crashed through the door and charged forward, covering the distance between rooms like it was nothing. He had enough time to pull off the covers on five needles before Lor slammed into him.

The blow knocked Adrian to the floor. The back of his head hit the tile, and he started to black out until a sharp, piercing pain shot up his leg. Crying out, he arched up and saw Lor sinking razor sharp claws into his shin. Lor pressed down, and the weight snapped the bone.

Adrian screamed, and Lor liked it. He snapped his jaws, his eyes flashing with cruel laughter. But the bastard was having too good a time to notice what Adrian had in his hand.

Aiming for Lor's blind spot, Adrian stabbed him directly on the front of his shoulder. The thick needles easily pierced his hide, pumping Lor with five doses of tranquilizer.

Lor jumped away, startled by the pain. He roared, the walls trembling under the powerful cry, and started back toward Adrian, even angrier than before. But after the first step, his eyes glazed over and he swayed on his paws. With all the exertion, his heart must have been racing so fast it carried the drug straight through his system in the span of a few seconds. He collapsed on the floor in a heap, chest heaving and paws twitching. A few more seconds, and he was out cold.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Adrian!"

Groaning, Adrian's eyes fluttered open; he couldn't remember losing consciousness, but the slightly nauseated feeling in his stomach confirmed it. Lal leaned over him, looking shaky and pale as he ran his fingers through Adrian's sweat-dampened hair.

"You're hurt." Lal's voice cracked.

“I’m okay, more or less,” Adrian joked weakly. He tried to move his leg and almost passed out again from the throbbing wave of agony that followed. “Or not. My leg is broken.”

The worst of the bleeding had stopped, since Lor hadn’t torn into any major arteries, but the wounds still oozed. He struggled out of his jacket, and Lal helped him tear off a sleeve to use as a tourniquet. Adrian wrapped the cloth tightly above the knee, and the painful throbbing eased enough for him to try standing.

“You need to see a doctor.” Lal slung Adrian’s arm over his shoulder to help support his weight.

Adrian shook his head, holding onto his breath as the worst of the pain subsided. “I’ll set it myself later. We have to get out of here before he wakes up.” Lor was still down for the count, breathing deeply and slowly in his drugged state.

“Think you can drive?” Adrian asked.

Lal nodded.

“Great.” Adrian started limping for the door as he leaned on Lal. “If we go slow enough, we can make it back to the apartment and call a cab from there.”

## Chapter Fourteen

They were scraping up the tire well by the time they made it back to Adrian's apartment. By some miracle no police officers had stopped them on the way, and the nosy landlord didn't seem to be at home; Vasquez's car was missing from the parking lot. The tenants on the first floor must have heard the commotion as Lal screeched into an empty stall, and lights turned on in a couple of windows. Thankfully, no one appeared to look outside.

Adrian managed to get out of the car on his own, but almost tapped out his strength in the process. Lal helped him up the stairs, practically carrying him. Adrian was in no shape to climb the steps, his breath coming in strained, short bursts. By the time they reached the second floor, Adrian had broken out in a cold sweat as he fought against the pain. He'd never realized how strong Lal was before this.

"Almost there," Lal encouraged, supporting Adrian's weight. He had the keys in hand when they arrived at the door, and locked it once they were inside.

Caleb was stretched out on the sofa, dressed and watching the TV. He bolted up when he caught sight of them in the doorway, his eyes widening in a silent expression as if asking, "What happened?"

Limping over to the couch, Adrian collapsed on the cushions. A game show played on the television screen with the sound turned off. The closed captioning ran along the bottom in a black and white ticker, and the combination of the fast moving letters and flashing lights sent a wave of dizziness over Adrian.

Lal lifted Adrian's leg onto the coffee table and told Caleb, "Kal is here with one of the Master's guards. The animal tried to kill Adrian."

Sucking in his breath, Caleb glanced over at Adrian's leg. Blood had seeped through the torn jeans.

"Is Jaylen still here?" Lal asked, gripping Caleb's shoulder.

Caleb shook his head. His eyes were red.

"He is a coward." Lal swore, his body trembling.

"We can't waste time." Adrian straightened with a groan. "Let's grab a few things that we need and go, all three of us."

"Stay still." Lal caressed the side of his face. He turned to Caleb. "Look for something in the bedroom to help with the pain."

"There's Motrin in the bathroom." Adrian bit down on his lower lip.

Nodding, Caleb vaulted over the back of the sofa and disappeared down the short hall. Lal kissed Adrian on the forehead. "I'm so sorry about everything," he whispered hoarsely.

This time, they both felt the temperature in the room drop, the air crackling with invisible currents of energy. Lal must have felt it the worst; his teeth were chattering as he pulled away from Adrian and turned around. Shadows swallowed the light from the television and the lamp on the end table, leaving only a dull glow behind.

"As well you should be." A male voice drifted toward them from the darkness. Like Jaylen's, it possessed a supernatural quality that echoed with power. But the tone was cold, like the frosty air surrounding them, and displeased. A figure took shape from the dusky shadows, a man shrouded in dark veils with solid black eyes free of pupils or irises. The

dimensions of the room shifted, the ceilings, walls, and front door to the apartment fading into the blackness churning around *Him*.

Jaylen's father. The Master.

Kal appeared crouched at his feet, gaze focused on the floor instead of meeting Lal's or Adrian's eyes.

"You bastard," Lal said in a throaty voice.

"Kal did well to summon me before this situation became any worse." The Master pierced Lal with an unblinking gaze. He regarded Adrian with the same unrelenting stare.

"I must apologize to you as well. It was never my intention to allow things to get so far out of hand."

"Please..." Lal started.

The Master touched a finger to icy white lips. "Be silent now. There were over fifty human minds that needed to be altered to remove the memory of tonight's fiasco, and Lor is a heavy burden to drag back to our realm. I am not pleased with you, kitten."

"Leave him alone." Adrian clenched his jaw, heart pounding.

"I didn't want humans involved in this." The Master's attention returned to Adrian. "Already I can tell your memory will be harder to cleanse than that of your friend whose thoughts led me here."

"Don't hurt him." Lal's voice trembled. "Please."

"I've made so many mistakes with you." The Master regarded him. "I never expected you to escape through one of my gates to this world, and I certainly didn't consider you'd attach yourself to a human. My son spoiled all three of you beyond repair."

The Master approached Adrian. "This isn't, however." He spread a pale, long-fingered hand over Adrian's wound.

The sharp, constant, throbbing pain stopped immediately, and Adrian let out the breath he'd sucked in, bending his leg at the knee. The bone had mended, the claw marks healed and gone.

"My God," Adrian breathed.

"Lor should never have touched you, or any other mortal in this world." The Master's frown sent a chill down Adrian's spine. "But you were foolish to risk your life for Lal."

The Master crooked his finger at Lal. "Come."

"Do as he says," Kal added in a small voice.

"Don't." Adrian grabbed Lal's wrist. He was scared and had no idea what he could possibly do against a being like the Master. But he couldn't let Lal go.

"I have to, Adrian," Lal whispered and slipped from his hold.

"He cares for you." The Master shook his head at Lal. "Such a cruel deception, kitten. For you both."

"No, it's not."

"It is. Because he'll never be enough for you." The Master opened his hand, and Lal's collar appeared on his palm, silver and shimmering. His gaze swept over Lal's body, his expression as void of warmth as those endless pools of darkness in his eyes. "Undress."

As he tore through the cabinets in the bathroom, Caleb felt the change in the apartment. He shuddered at the surge of power cutting through the air and making the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. Dropping the vial of painkillers, he moved out into the bedroom and peered around the door.

*God.* He clutched at the frame, seeing Lal and Adrian before the angry sorcerer. Neither of them stood a chance. At best, Lal would be taken back and his lover... He had no idea what could happen to Adrian.

None of this was right.

Caleb dashed to the end of the room. He cranked open the awning window and shifted forms to leap up onto the sill. Slipping between the horizontal slats, he dropped down from the window and landed on his feet two stories below. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on the scents carried on the evening breeze. If there was any chance Jaylen could still be somewhere nearby, Caleb had to find him. For all their sakes.

## Chapter Fifteen

The Master looped the collar around Lal's neck, and several thin chains of silver materialized through the empty rings of the choker, shining against his skin as they slithered over his body. They covered him with a series of delicate chiming sounds that echoed strangely, yet brightly, in the quiet. The Master flicked a wrist, and the chains danced to life, binding Lal's legs and tying his arms behind his back as the ends reached up to the collar. The chains and choker fused together in a seamless union, harnessing Lal completely. One of the links on the coil over his hips expanded, fitting itself around the base of his cock then tightening enough to draw a gasp out of him.

Lal's body reacted with desire, a blush spreading through his penis as it lifted and swelled against the binding. The silver ring glinted against the flushed skin, the swollen organ quivering. Adrian felt a tug in his own groin, and he gripped the edge of the sofa hard enough to make his hands ache.

The Master bent to speak softly in Lal's ear, but his voice echoed in the room regardless. "Look how much you enjoy this." He caressed Lal's cheek with the back of his hand. "You are a beautiful, lovely thing that lives to pleasure and to be pleased. In other words, a pet."

The Master reached to the side, and a lacquered box appeared in midair next to him. He opened the lid and withdrew a smooth leather-wrapped object from the container.

An artificial penis. The eight inch long phallic shape ended in a blunt tip with an opening like the ones on the collar fitted into the base. The muted lighting in the room reflected off the polished tan covering, outlining the stitches along the phallus's underside where the leather pieces were sewn together.

Lal tensed as the Master slid the tip down his spine, arching against the touch. The motion pulled on the chain, tugging on the ring fixed around his cock, bringing another gasp to his lips. He pushed back with his hips and met the tip of the leather toy with his rear.

"You're already prepared, stretched, and inviting," the Master observed. "You want this."

"Yes," Lal whispered.

Another of the rings on the chain expanded over Lal's backside. The Master slipped the head of the phallus through the perfectly sized diameter, setting the object in place between the curves of Lal's ass. Lal whimpered, the sound a choked cry of lust. He pressed back again, his thighs spreading open as far as the chains would allow, exposing the pink opening as the tip of the toy organ stroked over the flesh. The Master pushed, slowly easing the shaft into the passage, stopping when Lal groaned.

"More," Lal begged with a deep moan. But the Master's hand dropped away from the phallus and he remained silent, observing.

When Lal tried to straighten, the chains shifted and pulled on the ring secured at the base of the phallus. His cock jerked in response to the sensation and strained against the bonds, tugging the chain back in the other direction. The movement served to drive the toy deeper into his rear, the remaining end of the penis shortening as Lal took in the length

almost completely. He cried out again, another wordless sound of pleasure spilling out of him as a pearly bead of precum emerged on the head of his cock.

Adrian's stomach knotted, his emotions darting between arousal and distress. "Stop it," he choked out.

"But this is what Lal is," the Master replied in an even tone. "A creature incapable of true feeling, same as my kind. But he will surrender to sexual desire because the need is engrained in every facet of both his Natures."

He tugged on one of the free chains dangling from the collar at Lal's throat. "Tell him this. Then I can wipe his mind clean, and we can return to our realm."

Lal dropped to the floor on his knees. He moaned, his erection stabbing up from the cock ring at his groin like a rigid beam. The same color that tinted his penis spread across his cheeks, and his shoulders trembled. "I can't." He hung his head. When he looked up, his eyes flashed. "Because it's not true. I love him."

The answer took the sorcerer by surprise. He released Lal's chain and cocked his head to one side. "Impossible. You only favor his company, and he yours. It's a simple exchange of physical pleasure."

"No, Father. It's not."

"Jaylen, I should've known you'd run off to this world." The Master turned toward the bedroom door where his son melted from the shadows. Caleb stood beside him, breathing heavily like he'd run a great distance.

The Master frowned, the expression darker than the blackness swirling around him. "You still won't outgrow this infatuation, I see."

"If it were only an infatuation, I might have."

"Ridiculous." The Master dismissed him with a wave. "You and these three kittens have all been too spoiled, chasing foolish, weak ideals. I expect more strength from my heir."

"I'm not a child," Jaylen replied. "I won't let myself be afraid anymore. Not if Lal and this human male can risk everything to defy you."

"Ignorance," the Master hissed.

"Love," Jaylen corrected. "And I'll show you whatever strength you want to see in your heir in a fight to prove it."

"Don't be ridiculous." The Master narrowed his eyes into thin, piercing slits. The shadows around him became pools emptying toward an endless void, sucking in all the light and warmth in the room. His voice lowered in pitch, the air crackling with the release of power. "You don't have the gumption. Return home where you belong and stay out of this."

"No, Father." Jaylen's voice boomed like thunder. He moved forward with no sign of being cowed by the elder's posturing. "If this is what it takes, then so be it."

"You'd lose."

"I'll risk it." The shadows at Jaylen's feet danced wildly, his hands balled into fists.

"Hmm." The Master regarded him evenly. "You're serious."

When Jaylen didn't respond, the Master turned to Adrian. "Is this so?"

"Every damn word," Adrian said.

The Master exhaled evenly. "How foolish." It was unclear whether his statement referred to Jaylen for being bold enough to challenge him or Adrian and Lal for believing in their love. "Regardless, it seems this kitten has been claimed by a new owner."

He reached down and snapped the latch at Lal's throat. The chains and phallus vanished, along with the case hovering in midair. Adrian slid off the couch and threw his arms around Lal, holding him so tightly they could hardly breathe. It felt good to have Lal close, and he was never going to lose him.

"Keep the collar on," the Master told Lal. "So the Others know you belong with him, and that you're not a Stray." Lal nodded, and Adrian kissed the side of his neck above the silver chain.

“And you, Kal?” the Master asked. “What should I do with you, the only one of your brothers unclaimed by a lover?”

“I’ll be the Stray,” Kal whispered.

“So be it. One cat less to disturb the peace of my house.” The Master broke the collar at Kal’s throat. The bits of silver fell to the floor with a faint tinkle. “Stay in this world and do as you wish. My hands are clean of all of you.”

“Thank you,” Jaylen said quietly.

Acknowledging his son one last time, the Master gave a single nod of his head. The shadows washed over his body, and he vanished, leaving the room the same as it was before he’d arrived.

Kal straightened and headed for the door. He stopped when Lal called out to him.

“Where are you going?”

“It doesn’t really matter,” he replied over his shoulder. “I’m stuck here no matter what.”

“By your own choice.” Lal tensed in Adrian’s arms, bristling.

“Easy, it’s okay.” Adrian kissed the top of Lal’s head. “You can stay with us, Kal.”

“I don’t think so.” Kal’s voice softened. “It’d be hard for me to see the both of you every day, in love, and know that’s something I don’t have.”

“You’re jealous,” Lal said in a surprised tone.

“Always. Of you and Caleb both.” Kal’s eyes glittered. “I’ll see what I can find for myself in this world.” He crossed the threshold, shifting into the silhouetted form of a black cat, and left.

“What about you guys -- oh.” Adrian looked toward the bedroom, but Caleb and Jaylen had already gone. Finally alone in the apartment with Lal, the exhaustion from the day sank in, and he leaned back against the sofa, closing his eyes and releasing a long puff of air.

Lal kissed him on the throat. "Let's go rest."

"So we can wake up tomorrow, together." Adrian straightened and cupped Lal's chin, bringing their lips together.

## Chapter Sixteen

Adrian overslept the next day and ended up missing his morning classes, including the exam. He dragged himself out of bed long enough to fish his professor's number from his backpack and schedule a makeup test. Tossing himself back onto the mattress, he rested his head on Lal's lap.

"I guess I should try to study." He yawned. The tiredness from yesterday had evaporated in the morning light, and he felt good. Even better when Lal ran his fingers through Adrian's hair and smoothed the messy waves. "A little later."

"And I should help clean up the mess at the shelter and at your clinic," Lal said. He bent over, brushing his lips across Adrian's forehead. "A little later."

Adrian rolled over onto his stomach. He kissed Lal above the navel and swept downward along the smooth abdomen. His lips grazed the downy curls surrounding the base of Lal's semierect cock, and he mouthed the hardening organ.

A purr rumbled in Lal's chest. He stroked his fingers through Adrian's hair and released a deep sigh. "I want you badly."

"Then take me," Adrian murmured, rising to his knees. He cradled both sides of Lal's face and kissed him, drinking in the man's heat and sweet taste. Then he let go and fingered

the silver chain looped around Lal's neck. Adrian unfastened one of the empty rings from the collar and slipped it on. The band fit just right on his first finger.

"I belong to you too." Adrian smiled. "Take me any way you want to."

"Inside." Lal closed his eyes. "Fill all of me."

Adrian sucked in his breath, both his heart and body responding to the soft command. Leaning in to gently touch his mouth to Lal's, he reached over to the nightstand for the tube of gel. As he rubbed some of the lubricant over his thick shaft, his cock lengthened at the steady encouragement of his hand, and he moaned against his lover's warm, moist lips. Ready, Adrian settled between Lal's legs and lowered his hips. The tip of his cock found the stretched and welcoming opening below Lal's sac, and he slid his palm back over the slick flesh to grip the base of his erection. Hard and pulsing with desire, he eased into the hot passage.

Both men let out soft moans. Adrian shivered from the spiraling sensation of pleasure seizing his body, and his cock throbbed within the tight channel. He rocked into Lal, slowly inching farther up.

With each thrust, Lal's muscles tightened around Adrian's shaft and sucked him deeper, begging to be filled with an exquisite urgency.

Raspy moans vibrated between the two men, and Adrian pumped his hips, eyes closed, lost in the action of their bodies moving together in a feverish, sexual rhythm. He tried to open his mouth to call out Lal's name, only to find his lips had already parted to give voice to the cries of pleasure scratching in his throat.

"Oh God," Adrian breathed. He doubled over, worshiping his lover in a shower of kisses along Lal's neck. Sucking and nipping at the soft skin, he continued moving his hips.

"Deeper," Lal urged in a throaty voice. "Give me everything."

Mind, body, pleasure, love -- all of it. Adrian hadn't known how much he had to give until now. Each thrust brought him closer to the edge of release and total surrender, and he loved the grip of Lal's body as it came down around him so hard he ached.

Lal spread open to take Adrian in with several short gasps. He wrapped his legs around Adrian's hips and pushed up to meet the thrusts until both men locked together. He contracted around Adrian, clenching and tugging from the inside out.

The oncoming climax surged through Adrian, hitting him hard through his chest, lungs, and groin. It sucked him under, stealing his breath and making his body burn in the heat of passion.

Drowning in the flow, he couldn't scream or fight the current. Adrian clung to Lal, who surrounded him, engulfed him, consumed him. After holding back the burning rush behind his cock as long as he could, he let go.

Lal clutched at Adrian, holding his lover close against him as they both hit their climax. A cry tore out from deep inside Adrian's chest, the intensity of his orgasm flooding into Lal wherever they touched and were joined. The surge felt like a storm pounding on the shoreline, sweeping Lal away in the turbulent current.

He came, hard, the tip of his cock pressed tightly against Adrian's flat belly. A stream of searing wetness cut between their rolling bodies, and Lal squeezed his thighs to hold Adrian, enjoying the sensation of his lover's thick, driving rod of a cock wedged tightly in his ass. He wanted Adrian everywhere -- on him, in him, smothering his senses and drinking in his love. Lal demanded it, even after Adrian had emptied, and he clamped down over the throbbing organ.

Another orgasm gripped Adrian. He arched up, hips thrust down as the release came a second time in a shuddering wave. No more fluid jetted from his cock, but his taut balls slapped against the mound of Lal's rear as he relieved the tension in a series of short and fast

thrusts. Lal took it all and wanted more. He realized he would never get enough of Adrian, never tire of loving this man or being loved in return. They were one, now and always.

Lal gripped Adrian's shoulders, pulling him into an embrace more possessive than he'd ever given another. The muscles in Adrian's body gave out, and he crumpled in Lal's arms. They slipped apart, leaving Lal's anus stretched and balking at the sudden emptiness.

Holding Adrian tightly, Lal took the man's weight on himself and cradled his sweat-glazed body. Tears leaked from the corners of Adrian's closed eyes and ran down the sides of his face to splatter on Lal's heaving chest. Adrian didn't try to brush them away or move at all; he probably didn't realize he was crying.

Cupping Adrian's chin, Lal tilted his lover's face upward. He kissed Adrian on his brow and laved his tongue over the sweet, salty skin. He loved even the way Adrian's sweat and tears tickled his tongue.

"Lal," Adrian murmured.

Silencing him with a kiss, Lal continued gently bathing Adrian's face with slow strokes of his tongue. In turn, Adrian slipped his arms beneath Lal. His damp brown wavy hair brushed Lal's chin as he pressed his cheek over Lal's left pec.

"Thank you," Lal whispered. He adored Adrian; between them there was no "pet," no "master." Only love, and it was beautiful.

\* \* \* \* \*

They spent the day helping to clean up the veterinary clinic and the animal shelter. The morning news had a story about a striped lion running loose near the university, but since the animal had vanished without a trace, investigators believed it had all been a hoax set up by a few students. The photos some folks had managed to take on their phone cameras were too blurry to reveal much, a fact that supported the cops' theory it was a joke. Adrian listened to the people working at the shelter talk about the case without volunteering the

truth. He also kept the details from Marty, who stopped by late in the afternoon, complaining of a headache and a blurred memory of last night.

“Did we get drunk?” he asked Adrian, helping him fit a new door on the supply cabinet. “I kind of remember going to the bar and you telling me something about a guy you’re seeing.”

“Nothing else is coming to you?” Adrian raised his brows.

“Everything since late afternoon yesterday is fuzzy.” Marty pursed his lips. “Which is weird, since that place waters down their booze so much there’s no way even a nun could get drunk on a gallon of it. And what the hell happened here?”

Adrian shrugged noncommittally and cleared his throat as he drilled the hinges in place. “Must have been that guy who came to the shelter looking for a cat. Um, do you remember that?”

“Oh, yes.” Marty made a face. “Can’t wait until the police catch him and he shows up at the courthouse for an arraignment.”

“One way or another, I don’t think he’ll be coming around here anymore.” Adrian dusted his hands clean of wood shavings on the sides of his jeans.

Marty gave him a vaguely suspicious look. Before he could ask any questions, Lal popped in from the reception area. “I finished cleaning up all the broken glass out front,” he said, draping his arms around Adrian’s waist from behind.

“Then we’re done.” Adrian grinned.

“Now I remember your mystery man,” Marty teased. “The live-in lover you’ve never told me about.”

Adrian put his hand over Lal’s. “It’s a long story.”

“For another day,” Lal interrupted. He tugged Adrian toward the door. “We have plans.”

“Right.” Marty snorted, but smiled. He followed them to the door and touched Adrian’s shoulder. “You look happy, Adri.”

“I am.” Adrian touched his friend’s hand.

“You know, I still have those reservations set up down in Key West this weekend. Why don’t you and Lal go instead?” Marty said. “I’ll take care of your cat.”

Lal coughed into his fist and looked away. “Uh, well...” Adrian tried to think of a decent excuse. “Well, actually, Marty, tell James the two of you are going on that vacation and that’s it. Don’t let work or anything else get in the way of you two being happy.”

“That’s good advice.” Marty smiled thoughtfully. “Thanks.”

“Come on, the cat’s waiting.” Lal pulled Adrian down the steps, grinning.

And Adrian wouldn’t want his life any other way.

 THE END 

## **Anne Cain**

As a cover artist, illustrator and writer, Anne works for several publishing companies. Whenever she's not chained to the PC or doodling away in a sketch book, Anne spends too much time reading, watching anime or playing on the Wii.

Check out Anne's DeviantArt Portfolio at <http://annecain.deviantart.com/>