

KEEPING KARMA



TORY
TEMPLE

Keeping Karma

By Tory Temple

Chapter One

Alexander Myers stared into the face of a small, black and white rabbit and was not swayed by the twitching nose or the soft, floppy ears.

“This thermometer is going in,” he informed the bunny. “And I don’t mean your mouth.”

The rabbit stared back at Alex impassively, not impressed in the least. Alex glanced up at the elderly woman who was stroking the rabbit’s fur with a withered hand. “I’ll try to hold him,” she said in a quavering voice. “But sometimes he kicks.”

Alex smiled at her. “I can do it.” And with one swift move, he pinned the rabbit to the table and inserted the thermometer.

The rabbit did indeed give one strong kick before pretending that its life had ended and going limp on the table. Alex snorted. “You’re fine,” he told it, waiting for the thermometer to beep.

The rabbit did not respond, preferring instead to play dead, so Alex shrugged and watched the digital numbers on the thermometer. It eventually beeped and he withdrew it, jotting the animal’s temp down on the chart.

“Is it high?” the woman asked, like they always did. “Can you tell what’s wrong?”

“A little high,” Alex admitted. “The doctor can tell you more. He’ll be right in.” He cleaned the thermometer and deposited it back in the drawer before making a hasty exit. Patients always thought Alex knew more than he did, just because he was the first one they saw before the doctor. He really wasn’t sure how weighing an animal and taking its temperature could be good indicators that he knew what was wrong with their pets, but they always asked him anyway.

The thing was, he usually did have an idea what was wrong with them. But not for the reasons the clients thought.

Alex shook his head and closed the door to the exam room. He thumbed over his shoulder at the door and handed off the chart to Dr. Morrison. “Why does she keep coming into the emergency clinic when she knows that rabbit will be fine until morning?”

The on-duty vet shrugged and studied the paperwork Alex had handed him. “Maybe she doesn’t know. Or maybe she just wants company.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Alex returned to his position at the front desk and pulled his textbooks toward him again, hoping to get through one whole chapter on Clinical Radiology on

Birds of Prey before another frantic client came through the doors of the emergency clinic.

It wasn't that he didn't love his job, because he did. Working as a front-desk clerk slash vet tech at the local animal emergency clinic allowed him both the experience that he needed and time with animals he loved, not to mention time to take his beginning courses at veterinary school. The hours at the clinic kind of sucked, since they were only open during the times when regular veterinary offices and hospitals were closed, but he was single and used to it.

He'd been fortunate to find a school that offered its beginning courses online before switching to the classroom, so Alex spent most of his days off either sleeping, studying, or glued to his laptop computer in order to finish his latest assignment. He wasn't quite sure what he was going to do when the time came to switch over to the classroom, but since it was still a year away, Alex figured he'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

The front door made the soft electronic beep that signaled another client and Alex shoved his textbook away. It wasn't even midnight and they'd been busier than usual, so studying was probably out of the question.

"Bleeding," the young girl gasped. "My puppy. Bleeding. There was wood and a nail and bleeding."

Alex shoved back his rolling chair and came around the counter to get a better look. The puppy was indeed bleeding, although not as profusely as the girl's frantic demeanor seemed to indicate.

Hurt hurt hungry thirsty hurt came forward in waves from the small dog, probably a mixed-breed puppy about four months old.

"I know," Alex murmured back to it, taking the animal from the girl. "You can have a drink when we're done with you."

"In the backyard," the girl was saying. "There's a piece of wood up against the house. It has nails in it and it got knocked over and I heard a yelp and..." she trailed off and gestured at the dog. "And now he's bleeding."

The vibes of *hurt* were quickly being replaced by more complaints of *hungry*, and Alex grinned. "I'm not the doctor. But I think it looks worse than it is." Alex inspected the small wound in the dog's front leg. The flesh was ripped, but only a little. There would be a staple or two needed and that would probably be it. And the dog's thoughts were more centered around its empty stomach than its bleeding leg; that was always a good sign.

Alex hated the ones who were nothing but a huge haze of *pain* at him when their owners brought them in.

He cradled the dog under one arm and grabbed a clipboard with the necessary paperwork on it. "You do this while I take him back," Alex instructed the girl. "What's his name?"

Buttonsbuttonsbuttons came at him a split second before the girl sniffled, "Buttons. Because of these, see?" She pointed to three small brown spots on the dog's white chest that did look like a row of little buttons.

"Cool." Alex smiled reassuringly at her and hefted the puppy more securely under his arm. "Go ahead and bring that with us. I'll put you in a room and get the doctor."

"All right," she answered with a small quaver, her eyes on her pet.

He winked at her and pushed through the door to the back rooms with the puppy held firmly. "You're a cute thing," Alex told it. "Not much of a wiggler. Let's hope you hold still for the doctor."

Treat, the puppy thought at him. *Hungry. Treat.*

"If you're a good boy," Alex laughed. "We might have one around here somewhere." He deposited the puppy on the sterile metal table in the back room. The immediate vibe of *cold!* made Alex wince. "Sorry, little guy. Hang on for another minute." He grabbed a clean towel from the cabinet and spread it out on the table, then put the puppy on the cloth. "There. Not so cold."

The girl -- who said between sniffles that her name was Andrea -- sat in the chair next to the table and filled out the paperwork while trying to keep one eye on what Alex was doing to her dog.

He did a quick write-up of the dog and made a temporary bandage to staunch the blood flow from the wound until the doctor could staple it. The dog sat still as stone during the whole thing, its head cocked at Alex and a quizzical expression on its face. It was a look Alex was used to by now; the one the animals gave him when they started to sense that Alex could understand them. The cats seemed to take it more in stride than the dogs did, though. Almost as if they felt that all humans should be able to understand them.

It wasn't a true communication, Alex knew that much. He wasn't sure exactly what a "true" communication would entail, but it was probably more than just the random, faint vibes that hit him whenever he was near an animal. Their thoughts didn't come at him in sentences. Usually it was just a vague notion of how they were feeling or whatever instinct was consuming them at the moment.

Alex could do it as far back as he could remember. His family had had Duchess, a large standard poodle that Alex's mother was forever having groomed into the ridiculous styles that were so popular for the breed. Alex clearly recalled the waves of embarrassment that rolled off the dog after these grooming sessions, although the rest of the family never seemed to notice a thing.

Once, when Alex turned eight, his father had given him a betta fish in a small glass bowl. Alex had been delighted with the blue gravel and green plastic castle and watched as the majestic-looking fish had swam around and around, in and out through the castle window.

“Here, son,” Alex’s father said, handing him a small mirror taped to a popsicle stick. “The man at the store said to show the fish his reflection once a day and let him fight it for a few minutes. That way he won’t get bored.”

Alex didn’t know why a fish would have reason to be bored, especially with a plastic castle! But he took the mirror dutifully and lowered it into the bowl.

The fish -- which Alex had already decided to name Dodger, because he was blue like Alex’s favorite baseball team -- circled the mirror twice before seeming to notice its own reflection. Before Alex could pull the mirror back out or even react at all, his head exploded with sudden, violent sensations that sent him reeling backward, away from the fishbowl.

He watched in awe as the mirror fell to the bottom of the bowl and the fish began to dive toward and away from it, over and over. *Fight, intruder, kill*, the fish was thinking, in perfect rhythm, over and over. It was frightening and fascinating and Alex couldn’t look away. The fish was reacting purely on instinct, but Alex’s eight-year-old brain was too overwhelmed by the fish’s thoughts of rage to know or understand what was happening.

Twenty minutes later, Alex’s father found him standing just inside his closet door, crying silently with his hands over his ears. It didn’t block the fish’s thoughts, but Alex was trying.

His father was confused and concerned by Alex’s sudden refusal to keep the fish in his room, but had offered to let it stay in the master bedroom instead, as long as Alex fed it. Alex had readily agreed. From then on, he’d snuck into his parents’ room once day to drop food into the bowl and then fled before his father could lower the mirror into the water.

Alex still thought about that fish sometimes.

The warm puppy’s squirming brought Alex back from thoughts of the past and he smiled again at Andrea. “Okay. I’ll tell the doctor you’re ready. Let me just--”

Pee, the puppy thought.

Alex reacted as fast as he could. He snatched the puppy from the table and deposited him on the linoleum floor. Immediately, the little dog began to sniff around in circles before lifting its hind leg and urinating against the cabinet.

“Great,” Alex told it. “Perfect. Don’t worry, I’ll get it. No problem.” He sighed and waited for the puppy to finish peeing.

“Wow, you got him just in time,” Andrea marveled. “I never know when he has to go until it’s too late.”

“Yeah, it’s a gift,” Alex muttered, grabbing a towel and sanitizing spray from the same cabinet the puppy had christened. He wiped down the spot while the puppy sat on Andrea’s shoes and watched him.

Game! Play?

“No,” Alex answered, not able to suppress a chuckle. “Cleaning up your piddle is not a game.”

He discarded the towel in the soiled linens bin on his way down the hall, then handed the chart off to the doctor, who was standing at the counter chewing on a pen. Alex grabbed a bottle of water from the small employee refrigerator before returning to the front desk and settling down again with his textbook.

Andrea and her puppy emerged thirty minutes later, the puppy still as relentlessly cheerful as it had been half an hour ago.

“He come through okay?” Alex grinned at her, sliding the clipboard over for her to sign the paperwork.

She nodded and set Buttons down on the counter while she signed. “He was good. I feel terrible, he probably hates me.” Andrea gave a small snuffle and put her signature on the clipboard.

Alex glanced at the puppy. *Friend*, it was vibing, while gazing adoringly at the girl. *Friend. Play. Treat. Friend.*

“I don’t think he does.” Alex snorted a laugh and gave the pup a scratch behind the ears. “Dogs are pretty forgiving.”

“I hope so,” she said mournfully, scooping Buttons back up and shifting her purse over her shoulder. “He’s so sweet.”

Alex leaned back in his chair and watched through the window as she carried the puppy out to her car and loaded him up. He found himself hoping for another patient to walk in, if only because the books that were lying open in front of him were less than tempting.

When the sliding double doors stayed closed and nobody else came into the clinic with a panicked expression, Alex sighed and pulled his textbook closer. He leaned both elbows on the desk and propped his head in his hands while he read.

He was still sitting that way an hour later when the soft whoosh of the doors startled him out of the concentration he'd managed to find. A glance at the clock told him it was after midnight, past the time when most regular pet owners brought their animals in. The wee hours were usually reserved for people who had animals giving birth, or the random animal control officer who'd found some injured possum or something.

The two-tone tan uniform told Alex immediately what kind of client it was. He rose from behind the desk as an officer came toward him with a bundle in his arms. That in itself was unusual; there was a back entrance to the clinic where the officers would pull their trucks around and ring for Alex or whoever was on desk duty.

"Fawn," the officer said as Alex came forward to help him with his burden. "Out on the canyon road. No one called; I was just out there and saw it lying halfway off the shoulder."

Alex nodded and carefully took the blanket-wrapped fawn, glancing at the officer as he did so. "D. Travers" was on the thin metal nametag below his badge. Alex hadn't seen him before, but the animal control division of the police department had a high turnover of officers.

There was no clear message emanating from the trembling bundle, even though Alex did something he rarely did and actually tried to tune in. He usually got enough of a vibe without trying; when he concentrated, he tended to get somewhat of a headache. But even though Alex focused and listened, there was nothing to tell him if the deer was actually hurt.

There was some fear, though, that much was obvious even without the fawn speaking to him. The little body was shaking even as it tried to lie perfectly still in Alex's arms.

"I'll bring her back." Alex nodded at the paperwork the officer was already filling out for his report. "You can leave that when you're done." The animal control guys never usually stuck around for longer than it took to complete their forms.

"I'll wait to see how the deer is. And it's a male, not a female." D. Travers didn't look up from his clipboard.

Alex blinked, one hand still on the doorknob and the other arm cradling the fawn. "You checked?" It was a stupid thing to say, but the officers Alex had had contact with since working at the clinic didn't usually pay much attention to detail.

"I checked. There are no open wounds and he seems to be breathing all right, but his left foreleg is definitely broken. Also, he's going into shock." The officer was very matter-of-fact as he spoke, jotting down information on the papers at the same time he relayed it to Alex.

Well, shock would explain why Alex couldn't get a good read on the little deer, except for fear vibes. He nodded at D. Travers and pushed his way to the back, wondering vaguely what the D stood for. Probably "Dan" or "Dave". A lot of officers seemed to have one-syllable names like that.

Dr. Hutchins came out of his small office immediately. "Janelle!" he called to the x-ray tech, who appeared from the storage room with an apron and blank films in her hands.

Alex deposited the fawn on the steel table, flinching a little in sympathy when the deer jerked in response to the unforgiving cold metal. He couldn't put a towel down for x-rays like they could on the exam tables.

He knew technically that he wasn't supposed to be hanging out while the animal was x-rayed and examined, but the benefit of a very small emergency clinic with only three employees was that it allowed Alex to watch and learn. Dr. Hutchins was an excellent emergency-care doctor and let Alex glean as much information as he could.

Alex was lingering just outside of the x-ray room, watching the proceedings through the tiny window in the door, when he finally got hit with the waves from the deer.

Pain leg fear hide mother pain hide hide fear all came at Alex at once, even through the thick steel door, and he actually took a step back and squeezed his eyes shut tight. His hand flew to the bridge of his nose and pinched there, trying to stop the headache before it started.

It was time to back away from the animal, which happened sometimes. Sometimes, usually more with the wild animals than the domesticated ones, Alex needed physical distance or risked giving himself a migraine from the waves of communication. He didn't know why the wild animals were more intense, except maybe that the tame house pets had learned that their needs would be cared for eventually and they didn't need to ask so intensely.

In truth, Alex had no idea what the difference was.

He stumbled back toward the front, nearly forgetting that D. Travers would still be there. Alex remembered only when he made it back to his chair and sat down heavily. He rolled backward to meet the wall with a thunk and leaned his head there, eyes still closed.

"Uh," came the response from the officer. He cleared his throat. "Everything okay?"

Alex's eyes flew open and he stared at the dark-haired man in the tan uniform. The fawn's terrified thoughts were still rattling around in his head, making it difficult to concentrate on anything else. With a huge effort, Alex blinked and forced himself to speak.

“Um. Yes.” One deep breath helped to clear his thoughts, so Alex tried doing it again. Deep breath in, holding it for a moment, then letting it out seemed to allow him room to think. He did it twice and then attempted a wan smile. “Sorry. Little guy was kind of scared.”

D. Travers nodded, a small wrinkle between his brows. “Yeah.” His expression said more than the one word, and Alex tried to wipe his mind clean again so he could give the officer more than “He was scared.”

“Taking films now.” Alex forced himself to look up at the man who had moved closer to Alex’s desk. *Oh, green*, was his next thought, upon realizing the color of the officer’s eyes. *I wasn’t expecting that*. He made words come out, even though the thick fringe of black lashes around the green eyes was capturing all of Alex’s attention. “Then they’ll give fluids and start a round of meds, and probably transfer the little guy to the wildlife rehab place in the morning. The one out in Oak Canyon. You know it?”

It was a stupid thing to say; of course the officer knew it. D. Travers probably would have brought the fawn directly there if he’d discovered it during the daytime. The clinic was only open to receive patients when the rehab place was closed.

“Sure.” The man nodded and flicked his gaze over Alex’s face. “The rehab place. Brought three orphan raccoon kits in last week... hey, you all right, man?”

Alex sighed and rubbed his face. “Yeah. Yes.” He made himself grin at the officer and think about something other than the guy’s eye color. “Sorry. Been developing a headache all night; it finally made itself known.” Well, it was sort of true.

“Ah.” The officer nodded in sympathy. “You here all night? How much longer do you have?” His glance fell on Alex’s textbooks and he gave them a doubtful look. “And I don’t think those will help much with the headache situation.”

Alex checked his watch. It was nearing one-thirty a.m., which meant he had just over five more hours until the clinic closed for the day and he could head home to sleep until noon. “Here all night,” he confirmed with a sigh. “Same as you.” It was an assumption on Alex’s part, but he knew that the animal control guys were on twelve-hour shifts, usually from eight to eight.

D. Travers shrugged. “They put the rookies on nights,” he said with an eye roll. “Gotta pay my dues before I can work days. I don’t mind. I like nights.”

“Me, too,” Alex answered, realizing it was true. He did like nighttime better than daytime.

“Cool.” The officer grinned at him and pushed off the desk, heading toward the exit. The double doors slid aside for him, but he paused in the open doorway, looking thoughtful. “Sure would like to know how that fawn does.”

Alex watched the January breeze ruffle the man's hair. "Uh. Yeah? You want to check back in a night or so? I'm off tomorrow, but I work on Wednesday. Or, you know. Whoever's here tomorrow could tell you, too." Or the guy could just check with the rehab center, but Alex wanted to see if D. Travers would make the effort to come back to Alex's clinic.

The officer pulled out a small business card and returned to drop it on Alex's desk. "If I have a really busy night, sometimes I don't get to check on the critters I bring in. Could you call me? That's my extension."

The card landed on top of Alex's raptor book and he looked at it. "Sure," he said slowly. "Call you about the deer. Will do."

"Thanks." The officer grinned at Alex again and headed for the doors, this time not stopping. His white truck was parked at the curb and Alex watched until the man got in and drove away.

He dropped his eyes to the card again. "Dylan Travers -- Animal Control Division" was printed in small type, along with the county's seal and police department symbol. Alex touched the raised letters with the tip of his finger. Dylan.

The card went into Alex's wallet.

Chapter Two

When Alex found out two nights later that the little fawn had died, he had no idea what to do in regards to calling D. Travers.

Dylan, he reminded himself. The officer's name was Dylan. And his eyes were green. And Christ, he probably wasn't interested in guys, either, so what the hell was Alex thinking?

But the card remained in Alex's wallet for the next few days.

Five nights after Officer Dylan Travers had brought in the injured fawn, he came back, this time dressed in street clothes. Alex didn't recognize him.

Alex glanced up from the desk, where once again Clinical Radiology on Birds of Prey was keeping him company. "Hey, can I help you?" he asked, mistaking Dylan for a client. The fact that there was no animal in his arms didn't faze Alex; a lot of times frantic clients left their pets in the car if they were unable to carry them inside by themselves.

"Maybe," Dylan smiled, perching one hip on the edge of Alex's desk. "How's the fawn? You didn't call, and the rehab clinic didn't know about him."

Alex blinked and focused on the man's face. *Oh, shit*, he thought, realizing who it was. "Hey!" He half-rose from his chair and then sat down again, not really having anywhere to go. "Um, yeah. Sorry. The fawn." Alex stumbled over his words and wondered why; he didn't usually make a habit of being flustered by men. Not that he had a whole lot of men in his harem to get flustered over.

Dylan seemed to study Alex's face for a moment before looking disappointed. "He didn't make it." It was a statement, not a question.

"No." Alex tried to sound regretful, but the truth of the matter was, he hadn't really expected the little deer to live. He'd seen too many wild animals come into the clinic in a fragile state. Sometimes the adults pulled through, but more often than not, the babies' hearts would give out mainly from the shock. It was sad, especially if Alex had received any kind of *help* vibe from the critter, but he knew that sometimes helping the animal wasn't within the doctors' capacity. Other people might find the attitude callous, but it was necessary when you worked in veterinary medicine.

"Damn." Dylan chewed the side of his thumbnail and then sighed. "You know that's the third baby deer I've found since I started down here? And the third one that's died. You'd think one of the little buggers could make it."

Alex gave a rueful laugh. "Those little guys are like rabbits. They fall over dead if you say 'boo' too loudly. But yeah, it kinda sucks when you make the effort to save them."

Dylan nodded and pushed himself off of Alex's desk. "I guess, yeah. Hey, the raccoon babies I brought in all lived, though."

"Aw, those don't count." Alex chuckled and leaned back in his chair, folding his hands over his stomach. "Raccoons and possums aren't fragile. They're just mean."

"But cute." Dylan grinned and shoved his hands into the back pockets of his jeans. The jeans were black, Alex noted, and the tight-fitting t-shirt was in shades of gray. Nice. The colors suited Dylan well.

Alex realized after a minute or so that Dylan had stood up, but wasn't leaving. He stood with his hands in his back pockets and glanced around the clinic, eyes lighting on the little display that held grateful pictures and thank you notes from appreciative clients. Alex liked the cards and letters; he knew their clinic wasn't like a veterinary office with regular clients and patients, but the doctors and other employees still loved animals and tried to do their jobs with all the respect that people and their pets deserved. It was nice when a little note came in the mail.

"These are cool," Dylan mused. He appeared to be reading some of them and skimming others, picking up the cards and looking at the photographs of the animals. "I'll pretend not to see this one." He waved a picture of a ferret at Alex.

Alex laughed. "That's Bones." Bones was actually what the clinic could call a regular, since he had a horrible penchant for escaping his cage and finding all sorts of things to eat while his owner was at work during the day. Bones had been in three times for emergency surgery to remove items that blocked his digestive tract.

"Bones is illegal in this state." Dylan raised a brow and put the picture back carefully.

It was true. There were only two states in the union that still had a law against ferrets, California being one of them. It didn't stop the clinic from treating them in an emergency, however. Alex knew the Veterinarian's Oath extended to all creatures, great and small. "Yeah, well," he shrugged. "You can tell Mr. Penkava that the next time he brings Bones in. He's about eighty years old and it's the only thing left he has from when his wife was alive."

Dylan snorted a laugh. "Okay, okay. Maybe I won't arrest him."

The truth was that Alex knew the animal control officers had a hell of a lot more important shit to worry about than raiding people's homes to look for illegal domesticated pets. Now, keeping an alligator in your pool or a cheetah in the backyard, that was a little different. But California was full of ferrets that had been snuck in from neighboring states like Nevada and Arizona, and it would be an impossible task to track all of them down.

However, Alex figured he'd just keep the information that he had a ferret of his own at home to himself for now.

Alex was just starting to wonder if Dylan had really come in to find out about the deer or if he was merely bored when Dylan wandered back over to Alex's desk. "So," Dylan said, looking around the office again. Alex realized with amusement that the man was trying to look casual about something. "What nights do you work?"

When Alex began to understand what Dylan was trying to be casual about, his amusement vanished and blinky surprise crept in instead. Was he being hit on? It had been so long that Alex had forgotten what it was like.

"Thursday," he answered slowly. "Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Off Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday."

"Only four nights a week? Nice schedule."

"I have school work to do the other three nights. I don't really have much free time." Alex cursed himself for saying that last part, because the point was for Dylan to ask him out, wasn't it? At least, Alex thought it was.

"So, you eat breakfast, right? Or lunch?" Dylan was perched on the edge of Alex's desk again and Alex couldn't help noticing the way the man's jeans rested snugly over the firm bulge at the crotch.

He managed to tear his eyes away from Dylan's dick and focus on his face. The green eyes held a touch of amusement and there were little crinkles at the corners. "Yeah," Alex nodded, digging his own nails into his thigh under the desk. "Sure. I eat breakfast."

"Cool. You want to eat it with me tomorrow morning when you get off?"

The words "get off" were definitely not meant in the context that Alex's cock took them, and he tried desperately to keep his expression neutral even while his prick firmed up inside his scrubs. "Yup," he answered, pleased when his voice came out sounding normal and not strained. "Yes. Breakfast tomorrow. Me and you."

"Me and you." Dylan smiled and repeated Alex's words, rising once again from the desk. "Polly's Kitchen, you know the place? Can you meet me there at eight?"

"Sure." Alex shifted in his seat, hoping the fabric of his scrub bottoms was loose enough to hide his erection. "Eight's good, I know the place."

"Great." Dylan turned to go, then paused and looked back at Alex. "Oh, one more thing." He looked thoughtful and embarrassed at the same time. "I don't usually make a habit out of asking people out when I haven't even learned their name."

His name? Alex stared at Dylan, realizing the man was right, but feeling insanely flattered all the same.

“Alexander,” he finally said. “Just Alex.”

“Okay, Just Alex. Eight o’clock tomorrow.” Dylan gave him a half-smile and then was gone.

By the time six a.m. rolled around, Alex hadn’t had time to either study his books or think too much about Dylan Travers. The night had been exceptionally busy and the animals themselves in a communicative mood. That had made it easier on Alex when he was doing initial assessments, but as usual, it had given him a dull headache that refused to abate, even after taking three ibuprofen tablets.

A mother cat that had given birth to three kittens and was stubbornly refusing to push out the fourth one had been on the table in the operating room since four o’clock in the morning. *Tired*, came the constant vibe. *Tired. Thirsty. Tired.*

“I can’t give you water,” Alex murmured as he petted the tabby’s head. “They’re going to take out your kitty. You can have water after.” He finished prepping the tray for Dr. Grayston while trying to keep an ear out for the chime that signaled people walking through the front doors. This place really needed to be better staffed, Alex knew, but the money just wasn’t there. He didn’t mind doing the work of the front desk as well as minor vet tech stuff. Working directly with the animals was the best part, anyway.

Dr. Grayston marched into the small operating room with her glasses balanced on her nose and her gloved hands in the air. “Cuttin’ time!” she announced, and bent over the tray of instruments.

Alex waited until the exhausted cat’s vibes of *tired* faded away under the influence of anesthesia before stripping off his gloves and washing his hands in the sink. He headed out toward the front where the cat’s owners were waiting.

“You don’t have to wait out here,” he said. “I can show you into one of the exam rooms. After Dr. Grayston is finished, she’ll let you know how it went. She’ll watch Molly for the next couple of hours and then have her transferred to your regular vet. They’ll call you and you’ll be able to pick her up there sometime tomorrow, probably.”

The young couple nodded and then the woman spoke up. “So what do we do with the other three kittens while Molly’s here?”

“Hang on,” Alex laughed. He went to the back and scooped out some powdered formula into a plastic bag. He grabbed a couple of plastic syringes and tossed everything into another bag, then returned to the front and handed everything over.

“Directions for newborns are in there. They’ll be okay for a day until Momma comes home.” He grinned at the thought of the poor people playing mother cat and figured they had no idea how many times those kittens would be waking them up during the night.

Alex put the cat couple in a room, locked the front doors as it was now ten minutes past seven in the morning and therefore closing time, and waved goodbye to the two doctors and two technicians as he headed out the back door.

His four-year-old foreign compact car started as reliably as it always did, and soon enough Alex was letting himself into the comfortable apartment that he’d lived in for nearly seven years. It had two bedrooms, was on the top corner of a three-story building, and was rent-controlled. Alex had no serious plans to leave anytime soon, especially not when the nice little Greek lady who lived next door was always bringing him homemade hummus and baklava.

There turned out to be a small white box of the baklava on his doormat, Alex was pleased to discover, and he renewed his vow not to give up the apartment. He slid the baklava onto the kitchen table and pointed his finger at the orange marmalade cat that sniffed the box.

“No. That’s people food.”

Hungry, Macavity returned, still sniffing.

Alex rolled his eyes. “Hungry” was the most common thought he received from four-legged creatures, especially his own pets.

“There’s a full bowl of cat food right there,” Alex said reasonably, although it never seemed that the animals understood him as well as Alex did them. “Sorry it’s the diet stuff, old man. You’re getting a little hefty.”

The cat ignored him, which was no surprise, so Alex left him sniffing around the box and headed for the shower. He had twenty-five minutes to get clean, get dressed, and make it to Polly’s to meet Dylan. Totally doable if he didn’t stop to jerk off in the shower like he usually did.

Except the combination of warm water, soap, and a rough facecloth sliding over Alex’s cock changed his mind a little bit. He could do this fast if he concentrated, and Alex thought that it was probably in his best interests to jack off if he wanted his dick to behave during breakfast with Dylan.

All it took was the smallest bit of soap in his palm. He liked the friction to be a little rough. Alex cupped his balls with his left hand and used the hand holding the washcloth to rub his cock gently, spreading soap and shuddering at the slight burn of terrycloth on his skin. He enjoyed just the smallest amount of pain with his sex, nothing too heavy or

extremely uncomfortable, but the light twinges of ouch mixed in with the pleasure always added something good.

Alex wrapped the cloth all the way around his erection and tugged, letting the fabric pull a little. It was rough and warm and just right. Alex heard his own sigh echo in the small glass shower stall and was encouraged by the sound, almost as if hearing his own pleasure gave him permission to take it.

“Yes,” he vocalized softly. There was steam surrounding him now and he could see his skin turning pink from the heat of the water. He leaned his head back against the tile and stroked a little more firmly, hand tightening on the downstroke around the base of his cock and then back up again to rub over the head. Damn, this could be good if he had time to draw it out, but the thought of Dylan waiting for him at Polly’s spurred Alex on.

Dylan. Mmm.

The officer’s uniform was a huge part of the fantasy, so Alex went with it. The boots, the badge, the gun belt... not to mention the man inside the uniform. Alex shuddered as he pictured Dylan, the man’s startlingly green eyes presenting a contrast with his dark hair and lashes.

Alex still had a firm hand supporting his sac and as he tugged and stroked himself with the facecloth, he felt his balls pull up and tighten under his fingers. Alex sped up his strokes at once, feeling the welcome tingle that seemed to start from his thighs and rise up toward his spine.

Alex came with his fist tight around his cock and back arched. A soft grunt escaped him, but that was the only noise he made as three white ribbons of fluid arced through the air and hit the glass of the shower door. The rush of pleasure was sharp and intense, and Alex felt his knees threaten to give out and send him in a heap to the shower floor.

A tremendous show of willpower kept him standing upright long enough to wipe the door clean and rinse off under the spray. By the time Alex shut off the shower and grabbed a towel, he had his bearings again.

Finding a clean pair of shorts and t-shirt was just a matter of digging through the fresh laundry in the basket. “Fold those for me while I’m gone,” Alex told Macavity, who had moved from sniffing the baklava to his usual perch on top of Alex’s dresser. The cat narrowed his eyes to slits and began to wash a paw.

Clean. Wash. Groom. Clean.

“Yeah, that trip from the kitchen to here must have been a dirty one.” Alex chuckled the ginger cat under his chin.

He had just grabbed his keys and wallet and was leaving the bedroom when a very strong vibe assaulted him, enough to snap his head to the side and make Alex put a hand on the doorframe to steady himself.

Cold!

Whirling around to look at Macavity, Alex realized almost at once that the thought hadn't come from the cat. Alex's gaze traveled past the cat to the small bookshelf under the bedroom window and lit on the glass tank. He crossed the room immediately and checked the rubber heating pad underneath it.

"Aw, Violet." Alex spoke soothingly to the young Rosy Boa and lifted her out of her tank. She curled immediately around Alex's arm and lay very still, absorbing the heat from his skin.

Cold.

"You are, yes. I'm sorry, sweetheart." With his free hand, Alex unplugged the heating pad and then plugged it back in, hoping it would heat up again. It didn't comply, of course, and now he was on the verge of running late.

Muttering, Alex stomped to the kitchen and grabbed a plastic storage container from the cabinet. He filled it with warm water and then returned to place it in Violet's tank, uncoiling her from his arm and placing her in the water. She settled in immediately with only her head out, resting it on the side of the dish.

"Stay there till I get home," he informed the snake. "I'll buy you a new heating pad on the way."

There was no other response from the snake, which was pretty much the usual for Violet. It was rare that Alex heard anything from her, except for maybe the occasional aggressive *hunt kill hunt* when he offered her a mouse once a week.

A mouse that had been frozen and thawed, of course, because Alex didn't think he could handle the vibes from a live mouse being stalked by a snake.

"I'm leaving," Alex announced to his apartment, and was relieved when there were no other protests from the various critters he shared space with. "And I'm late."

But only by seven minutes, Alex was pleased to note as he pulled into a parking space in the lot of Polly's Kitchen. Hopefully Dylan wouldn't think Alex had stood him up just yet.

Dylan was waiting in the lobby of the restaurant and Alex nearly walked right by the man. He felt himself blush when he realized that was the second time he hadn't recognized Dylan out of uniform. "Hey," Alex greeted. "I'm late, I know. Sorry."

“Hey.” Dylan rose with a grin, his legs encased in jeans and his broad shoulders covered by a navy blue t-shirt. “You’re not late. Well, not compared to my mom, who never gets anywhere within thirty minutes of the appointed time.”

Alex laughed. “Uh-huh. My sister does that. I’m used to it, but it makes her husband crazy. Maybe it’s a woman thing.”

“You didn’t hear that from me.” Dylan smiled at him and Alex felt another faint stirring in his groin area despite the relief he’d given himself earlier.

The young hostess sat them and handed off their menus before turning away with a flip of her ponytail. Alex didn’t bother looking; he’d have what he always had when he came to Polly’s.

He gave Dylan a sidelong look while the man studied his menu. The light stubble along his jaw caught Alex’s attention and he was pleased that Dylan hadn’t shaved. That made it less of a formal date and more of a... something else. Alex didn’t know.

“The pancake stack,” Dylan said to the waitress. “Two eggs over-hard and three sausage links. No, make that bacon.” He nodded. “Bacon, not sausage.”

“Veggie omelette, extra cheese,” Alex said when she looked his way. “And give him my sausage.”

The instant grin and flash of humor in Dylan’s eyes made Alex’s cheeks turn hot. The waitress snorted at both of them and walked off, cracking her gum.

“I just meant so you didn’t have to choose,” Alex mumbled, playing with the edge of his paper napkin. He didn’t know why he was embarrassed; it wasn’t like he was a blushing virgin.

“It’s cool.” Dylan smiled at him across the table and Alex found himself mesmerized by Dylan’s straight white teeth. “So you don’t eat meat?”

Alex shook his head. “Nope. I used to, but I went to Mexico one summer about six years ago and got really sick after eating a steak down there. I came home and thought I’d get better, but my stomach wasn’t right for at least three months. Finally, I went on a no-meat diet to see if that would help, and I’ve been fine ever since.” Alex shrugged ruefully. “I miss chicken sometimes, but otherwise, I mostly don’t notice.”

“I have a weakness for hamburgers.” Dylan sounded apologetic.

“Fine by me.” Alex laughed. “Some of my friends do the no red meat thing, but no one else is strictly vegetarian like me. It’s hard at barbeques and stuff, but I survive.”

“At least you’re not... what do they call it when you don’t even eat animal products?”

“Vegan. And no way. Cheese and I have a very special relationship.”

“Nice. I make a really good cheese fondue.” Dylan was grinning at him again, sending that thousand-watt smile across the table and making Alex’s dick twitch in his shorts.

He was saved from having to wonder if that was an invitation or not by the arrival of their breakfast. They both tucked in immediately and Alex was pleased to see that Dylan seemed to enjoy his food. Alex was an eater, despite being a vegetarian, and had grown up trying to duplicate his twin sister’s gourmet recipes. He didn’t have much success in the kitchen, but he still liked to cook.

When their plates were cleared and only a couple of crusts from Alex’s toast were left, Alex sat back with a satisfied sigh. “Good stuff. Breakfast is usually a bowl of cold cereal before I head to bed.”

“Oh, damn!” Dylan’s eyes widened. “You were up all night! I forgot, man.”

“Nah, I’m good till about ten a.m. Then I might need to crash.”

Dylan glanced at his watch and raised an eyebrow. “So we’ve got about... forty-five minutes.”

“Yeah.” Alex laughed and rolled his eyes. He could already feel the food coma stealing over him, so it was no use pretending that he’d be able to stay awake for a couple of hours. “But hey. You want to come back to my place for a while? Then at least when I need to crash, I don’t have to drive anywhere.”

Sure, Alex, he told himself. That’s why you’re inviting the nice officer back to your apartment. So you don’t have to drive anywhere when you feel tired.

He was about to laugh and retract the offer to save himself the embarrassment of Dylan saying no, because going to breakfast and going to a guy’s place were two really different things. It wasn’t like him to make that kind of offer, so Alex had no clue where the idea had even come from. “Never mind,” he started to say, at the same time Dylan shrugged and said, “Sure.”

“Sure?” Alex repeated.

“Sure,” Dylan echoed. “Your turn. Say ‘sure’ again.”

Alex’s cheeks got warm for the second time in an hour when he realized he was being teased. No one ever really teased him, aside from his sister Tabitha. And when it was coming from Dylan, it just made Alex all the more self-conscious.

Alex ignored his flaming cheeks. He was too fair-skinned to hope that Dylan missed the blush, but he covered it by wiping his mouth with his napkin and throwing some bills down on the table. “Okay,” he agreed. “You and me, back to my place.”

Dylan gave him a half-smile and tossed cash on the table.

Chapter Three

Alex started to panic about halfway home. He couldn't remember if he'd left the guest room door open or closed, and also if the ferret shampoo was still on the sink in the kitchen. Shit. The last thing he needed was for Dylan to find out Alex had illegal pets before they'd even done more than had breakfast together.

He shifted from foot to foot at the bottom of the stairs leading up to his place. Dylan parked his late-model truck in one of the guest spaces and ambled over slowly, hands shoved into the front pockets of his jeans. "Nice complex," he said, looking around. "Pretty new, huh?"

Alex mounted the stairs and nodded. "Five years old or so. Been here about three. My sister harps on me for paying rent instead of trying to save for a house of my own, but where am I going to live in the meantime? She isn't offering her spare bedroom up, you'll notice."

He knew he was babbling, but his brain was already skipping ahead to trying to recall what the place had looked like when he'd dashed out a couple of hours ago. It'd been pretty clean, Alex knew that much. But was Karma's door open? Fuck, he couldn't remember.

Didn't much matter now. Dylan was standing behind Alex as he fumbled with the key in the lock, close enough for Alex to smell a very faint touch of light aftershave. His cock gave another warning twitch in his shorts and Alex knew why it was suddenly so damn difficult to remember what his apartment looked like. His dick was taking his brain's necessary blood.

He finally got the door open and was met immediately by Macavity. The ginger cat meowed angrily, presumably upset by Alex's uncharacteristic rushing out so soon after he'd gotten home this morning.

Food. Nap. Pet. Food. Nap!

Yup, definitely upset by the interruption of his morning routine. Alex and Macavity usually napped together when Alex arrived home from work.

"Sorry, bud," Alex apologized. "We'll nap later, you and me. Got company."

Dylan bent over a little, hand outstretched for the cat. "Wow, he's big. Come here, handsome."

Macavity narrowed his eyes to slits and did no such thing, instead preferring to wind in and out of Alex's legs and prevent him from going further into the apartment.

“He’s big,” Alex agreed, trying not to trip. “And stubborn and old. And fat.” He glanced into the kitchen and noted the empty food dish. “See?” he said to Macavity. “That diet stuff’s fine when you’re hungry.”

Macavity ignored him, although Alex was getting a distinct vibe of “*stranger*” that said the cat wasn’t so impervious to Dylan after all. There were only a handful of guys that Alex had ever brought home, and Macavity hadn’t paid attention to any of them.

“Cats are cool.” Dylan watched Alex attempt to move without falling. “My brothers were both allergic, so we never had one. But I always thought I’d get one when I moved out. I haven’t gotten around to it, I guess.”

“You can have Macavity. He was my sister’s kitten, then I ended up watching him for her when she got married a few years ago and went on her honeymoon. Somehow, she just never came back for him.” Alex rolled his eyes, but remembered telling Tabitha that she might as well just leave the cat with him for a little longer, since they’d gotten used to each other and everything.

Dylan gave up trying to get love from Macavity and chuckled. “Okay, you win,” he told the cat. “I’ll ignore you, too.”

“That’s the quickest way to get a cat’s attention. You want something to drink? I have cold soda or water, but that’s about it.” Alex watched as Dylan moved further into his apartment and glanced at some of the pictures on the fireplace mantel.

“I’m good for now.” He peered closely at Alex’s favorite picture, the one that had been taken on the ski slopes of Tahoe. “This is your family?”

“Uh-huh. Mom, Dad, sister, me. That’s Tabitha.”

“Who’s older? You guys look about the same age.”

“She is. But only by six minutes.” And God, she never let him forget it.

“Oh, twins. Cool.” Dylan nodded and moved along the mantel, scanning the other pictures.

Man of few words, Alex noted to himself. He liked that, although he imagined it would be hard to tell how Dylan was really feeling about something. If that situation ever arose, of course.

Alex used Dylan’s momentary distraction to snatch the bottle of ferret shampoo -- yes, apparently he’d left it out, just like he’d thought -- and jam it under the sink. A quick check down the hallway showed the door to Karma’s room was definitely closed, so Alex breathed easier and moved into the living room.

He sat on the sofa and let Dylan finish perusing Alex's family photos. Dylan took his time, until eventually he turned and grinned at Alex. "So do I get to see the rest of the place, or what?"

Alex glanced around and laughed. "This is pretty much it. The other two rooms are just bedrooms."

Dylan just stood there, hands in his pockets and a half-smile curving his mouth, until Alex said, "What?"

The other man chuckled, green eyes twinkling. "That's what I want to see."

Again, Alex felt the flush creep into his cheeks. What *was* it with the whole blushing thing? God, Dylan was going to think Alex had never had a guy over.

"Oh, right," Alex mumbled, getting up and ducking his head in embarrassment. "The bedrooms. Well, one's just guest bedroom, so we'll skip that."

Not to mention it was sort of a ferret kingdom in there, but the nice animal control officer didn't need to know that. Not until Alex knew him a little better.

"And your bedroom?" Dylan was watching Alex with that amused look again, the one that could have made Alex feel young or stupid but somehow didn't.

"My bedroom." He opened the door with a flourish.

COLD.

Christ, he'd forgotten about Violet. Alex nearly backed up a step from the force of the snake's thought, but Dylan was immediately behind him and there was nowhere to go. Alex crossed the room quickly and lifted Violet out of the now-cold water he'd given her before he'd left. "I'm sorry," he said to her, and let her wrap her cool scales around his wrist again.

Dylan had followed him into the room and watched as Violet curled herself around Alex's forearm and absorbed his heat. "Oh, pretty," he murmured, touching Violet with gentle fingers. "Snakes are awesome." He tilted his head and studied her. "She's a... red tail?"

"Rosy," Alex corrected, pleased that he wasn't going to have to put Violet in another room. The last guy he'd brought home had freaked the hell out over the snake and refused to be within fifty feet of her. Alex had put Violet in Karma's room, let the guy blow him, and then kicked him out.

"I like snakes. I just don't like to feed them." Dylan gave a sheepish smile and kept touching Violet. "I know it's the circle of life and all that. But if I had to give a snake a

fuzzy little mouse once a week, I'd end up with a cage full of feeder mice and a hungry snake."

Alex grinned and nodded. "Oh, I hear you. Violet only gets frozen mice. A snake can get hurt by live prey, so I just go the easy, humane route and buy them frozen from the store."

Of course, Alex didn't think he would tell Dylan about the waves of complete and utter terror he'd gotten from the first live mouse he'd tried to feed Violet. His whole body had locked up and it had taken a huge amount of strength to make himself even move enough to snatch the mouse back out of Violet's tank. He'd been trembling as much as the tiny creature, and had paid for his mistake later with a four-hour migraine headache.

"Here," Alex said to Dylan. He unwound Violet from his arm and handed her over. "Can you hold her for a minute? Her heating pad broke and I forgot to pick up another one on the way home. I have to rig up something temporary."

Dylan nodded without comment and took the snake, cooing softly to her as Violet rewrapped herself around another warm arm. She wasn't picky, Alex noted. Just cold.

Alex left the room and rummaged through the small linen closet in his hallway. He was pretty sure that holding Alex's snake hadn't been on Dylan's list of things he was going to do this morning. Then the euphemism struck Alex and he revised that in his head a little bit.

The electric blanket was a little musty from being in the closet, but Alex didn't think Violet would care. He returned to his bedroom and found Dylan sitting on the edge of his bed, talking to Violet in a low tone. "One more minute," Alex apologized.

Dylan shrugged. "We're okay. She likes me."

I like you. Alex thought it but didn't say it, and realized it was true. For as little as he knew the man, Alex liked Dylan's quiet, unassuming manner and the way he handled animals.

Quickly getting the blanket set up under Violet's tank as a temporary fix, Alex reached for his snake. "There we go. She'll be all right for a while."

Dylan extended his arm and let Alex unwrap Violet. "Poor thing. Sucks to be cold-blooded, huh?"

Violet gave no other response except to flick her tongue out to taste the air. When Alex settled her back into the tank, she slithered over to the part of the glass that was being warmed by the blanket.

Snake issue was temporarily fixed, so Alex turned back to the man sitting on his bed. Dylan had leaned back on both hands and was watching Alex again with that same quirky half-smile. "Anyone else you have to take care of?" he asked, eyes crinkling.

"Apparently, just you," Alex said. He felt his own mouth curve in response to Dylan's grin.

Dylan looked up as Alex settled a knee on the bed. "I'm pretty low-maintenance. I don't even need a heating pad."

"Maybe not. But I'll toss you a frozen mouse when we're done." Alex laughed and pushed Dylan backward, far enough so that he could crawl up and straddle Dylan on hands and knees.

Dylan settled his hands at Alex's waist and urged him down to rest on top of Dylan's prone body. "No mouse," Dylan whispered, and then brought up a hand to slide through Alex's hair.

Alex let Dylan bring his head down easily for a kiss. God, he tasted good: some strawberry jam from breakfast, some coffee, and some other flavor that seemed to just be Dylan's own unique taste. Alex couldn't help rubbing his tongue along Dylan's to try and capture more of the flavor.

The kiss wasn't shy or tentative and Alex was glad. He hated it when a guy was too delicate about kissing or even when they didn't want to do it at all. Alex loved tasting men's mouths and it made him hard when the other guy was into it, too. Kissing gave a really good clue to how a guy did other stuff in bed.

Dylan had immediately wrapped a leg around Alex's hip and Alex was pleased to feel a nice, thick cock pressing into the juncture between his thigh and groin. He slid forward slightly, dragging his own cock over the spot, and received a small intake of breath from Dylan as reward.

"So what'd you have in mind?" Alex asked. "I don't fuck on the first date." That was a lie; he'd totally fucked and been fucked on lots of first dates, but Alex wasn't quite sure why he didn't want to go there with Dylan right now. Maybe because he actually liked the guy.

"What you're doing feels good." Dylan rocked his hips up to prove his point. His eyes had changed from bright green to a rather smokier shade of jade that Alex found fascinating.

"There's stuff that feels better." Alex wedged a hand in between them and found the button fly of Dylan's jeans. They were old jeans, thank God, because one flick had the fly completely open and then Dylan's prick was in Alex's hand, all smooth and hot and just a little wet at the tip.

Dylan gasped and arched up again. "You're right," he panted, eyes fluttering closed. "That feels a hell of a lot better."

Alex made a noise of agreement. "No underwear. You come prepared."

There was no answer from Dylan this time, save a small noise he made that went straight to Alex's cock and made him remember that Dylan wasn't the only one who was hard. God, Alex was like iron in his shorts and he realized he'd been humping Dylan's thigh like a dog.

He started stroking Dylan in earnest, trying to learn the shape and feel and what Dylan seemed to like best. Alex couldn't tell at first, since Dylan seemed to respond to everything Alex did with his hand. He liked the upstrokes, downstrokes, tight squeezes. He gasped at Alex's thumb pressing into the slit of his cock, then gasped again when Alex smoothed fingers over the head.

Finally, Alex just asked him. "What do you like?" he murmured, really wanting to know.

In answer, Dylan took his hand and put it over Alex's. He tightened Alex's fingers and slowed the pace down until their hands were moving rhythmically together and Dylan was pushing through the tunnel of their fists. "That," Dylan groaned. "God. Like that."

Alex nodded and tried not to focus on the leaps and twitches his own dick made. There was a pink tinge now to Dylan's skin and those thick black lashes lay in a fringe on his cheeks. Dylan's chest heaved and Alex could see the pulse in his neck beating strongly just below the surface.

"Almost, huh?" Alex encouraged. He kept his strokes the same but tightened his fingers just a touch more. "Right there?"

"Right there," Dylan answered with a strangled sound. "Oh, fuck, right--" he cut himself off as the cock in Alex's hand gave a flex and then Dylan's hips snapped forward as he started to come. Warm fluid made a single arc and then flowed over their fingers. Dylan jerked and trembled for a moment or two, then suddenly relaxed against Alex.

Alex stripped off his t-shirt and used it to clean off their hands and swipe at the stray drips. "Nice," he approved with a grin, and leaned down to kiss the self-satisfied smile on Dylan's mouth.

"But nicer still," Dylan drawled, "would be me returning the favor."

There was no argument to that, especially not with his dick still jutting into the side of Dylan's hip. Alex let Dylan push him to his back and reach into his shorts. "Oh," Alex breathed when he felt a warm hand close around his cock.

“What’s this?” Dylan reached up with his other hand and touched the small steel ring in Alex’s left nipple.

As always, the sensation of his piercing being touched sent a spark right down his spine and into his balls. “God, again.” Alex arched his neck and closed his eyes, not caring if it looked shameless. With his cock in Dylan’s hand, Alex *was* shameless.

His eyes were closed, so Alex didn’t see Dylan bend his head to take the ring into his mouth, but he sure as hell felt it. A warm, wet tongue bathed the piercing at the same time there was perfect pressure on his cock. That, coupled with the way Alex had been hard for nearly two hours, made the perfect combination. He didn’t have time to do more than grunt before he shuddered and spilled into Dylan’s hand.

“Oh, so you like that,” Dylan laughed softly. “I’ll remember that for next time.” He reached for Alex’s discarded t-shirt and used it to wipe his hands before dropping it over the side of the bed.

“Mmmhmm.” Alex wanted to say more on the subject, possibly about how his last boyfriend had suggested Alex get pierced and it was the best decision he’d ever made because *God* it felt good, but the combination of eight hours’ work, a full stomach, and a great hand job were bringing on the expected sleepiness.

Dylan grinned and stretched out in Alex’s bed, curving an arm over Alex’s stomach and putting his head down on Alex’s pillow. “Right on schedule for that nap.”

“Stay,” Alex heard himself mumble, and then he slept.

It had been a few hours, he could tell by the sun, but not as long as he usually slept because his eyes were still gritty and his head was fuzzy. He just couldn’t figure out what had woken him.

Alex blinked at his ceiling and then felt the weight next to him. Oh, right. There’d been Dylan and breakfast and then a really great orgasm and then naptime. But even the fact that there was an unfamiliar body in his bed hadn’t been what had woken him. Alex had felt something else, something that...

...had a cold, wet nose and a small, furry body.

“Oh, shit,” Alex whispered, staring at Karma as she wiggled happily on the blanket and prepared to pounce in his direction.

The wily ferret had somehow gotten out of her room, although this didn’t really come as a surprise. She’d done it before and Alex always made note to fix the latch, then promptly forgot about it.

PlayplayplayPLAYNOWplay! Play?

That was pretty much the only vibe he ever got from Karma, except for the occasional “sleep” thought. Considering she slept for eighteen hours a day, he figured “sleep” would be more common, but ferrets were unpredictable.

“Come here,” Alex murmured to Karma, trying not to do anything that would either entice her to pounce or wake Dylan up. He held out a hand but didn’t wiggle his fingers, knowing she would think that was an invitation to start dancing around and make happy noises at the attention.

Karma lowered herself to the blanket and began to sniff around. Her whiskers quivered as she took a tentative step onto Dylan’s thigh. Alex sat up as slowly as he could, holding his breath, and made one desperate grab. “Karma,” he hissed, but it was too late.

She jerked out of his reach and immediately started what Alex had long ago dubbed the ferret war dance. Twisting and turning with all four feet in the air, Karma backed away from him and began making the little “dook dook dook” noises that signified total ferret happiness.

Alex could have possibly still grabbed her and shoved her behind his back while scrambling out of bed, but Karma was far too gleeful about being paid the attention she thought she deserved. She scooted out of his reach and dashed straight up Dylan’s leg to his chest. She paused there to sniff, and that was when Alex noticed Dylan was awake and staring at her.

“What,” Dylan asked, his voice hoarse from sleep, “is that?”

Chapter Four

“Um. It’s a carpet weasel?” It was a lame answer. Alex knew Dylan knew exactly what Karma was.

“Uh-huh,” Dylan said, his tone neutral.

A day late and a dollar short, Karma chose that moment to slink back over to Alex’s lap and nose around. Alex held her firmly and crawled out of bed. “I’ll just put her away. Be right back.”

Karma started to squirm in his hands as soon as she realized where they were headed. *No! No room! Play play play outside!*

“You are going to your room,” Alex muttered. He knew Karma understood the word ‘room’ from all the times he’d tried to train her to go there by herself, but she had a mind of her own. And Alex called bullshit on all the people who said you could train a ferret, anyway.

He got to her door and saw that yes, she had indeed managed to nudge it open because of the faulty latch. Alex sighed and tossed Karma onto one of the three hammocks that were strung up from various places in the room. “You stay there, brat.”

She did no such thing, of course, wriggling around like a little whirling dervish and disappearing into one of the long PVC-pipe tunnels. Alex could hear her nails scrabbling along the pipe as she navigated her way.

Wondering how he could successfully keep Karma in her room, Alex turned to study the latch mechanism and bumped straight into Dylan. Of course the guy had followed Alex; it would have been stupid to assume he would have stayed cooperatively in Alex’s bed. And possibly forget he ever saw the small, illegal animal that Alex kept as a pet.

“Wow.” Dylan whistled softly and pushed Karma’s door open a little farther. His gaze scanned the room, taking in the hammocks, pipes, pillows, and tunnels that Alex had laid out.

“Yeah, it’s...” Alex trailed off, his own gaze traveling around the room as if seeing it for the first time. “Kind of elaborate.”

“It’s that, yeah.” Dylan smiled a little and nudged one of Karma’s bell-balls with his foot. “Lucky ferret, getting a whole room like this.”

“Oh, there used to be more. I had five in here. But then they all got old and died, and Karma was the baby, and she never got along too well with the other ones so I didn’t get her a friend once she was alone, and--” he cut himself off abruptly when he realized that

he'd just revealed that not only did he own one animal that was against California law, but at one time he'd had four others.

"Five, huh?" Dylan leaned on the wall under one of the suspended pipes and raised a brow.

Shit, shit, *shit*. What the hell was it about this guy that made Alex say stuff like that? Or blush, for that matter? God.

"Five," he mumbled. He'd already said it, no use trying to lie now. "Uh... I was watching them for a friend?"

To Alex's surprise, Dylan laughed. "I'll buy that." He pushed off the wall and took the two steps that were necessary to bring him into Alex's space. "Let's not tell anyone that I know that information, okay?"

He was close enough to Alex's mouth for Alex to feel the warmth of Dylan's breath as he spoke. "Okay," Alex agreed, for lack of anything more brilliant to say. It was hard to think when those green eyes were that close.

There was time to see Dylan's answering grin before he moved the extra millimeter and kissed Alex softly, tongue darting out to swipe at Alex's upper lip. He didn't touch Alex in any other way, but it was still enough for Alex's cock to respond immediately.

"Jesus," Alex muttered against Dylan's mouth. "This is not good." He meant completely the opposite, of course. Because it was really, really fucking good the way Dylan's tongue curved around his own, but Alex had never wanted a casual hook-up this much. Then again, he wasn't usually asked out on breakfast dates with casual hook-ups, so maybe this was more than it seemed.

"Oh, I think it's good." Dylan was smiling while he kissed Alex. Alex could feel the curve of his lips as the man nipped and licked. "In fact, I think it's good enough to -- ouch, the fuck?!"

One minute Alex had a nice, firm body to press up against, and the next minute found him grabbing at the wall to keep from falling forward. He shook his head and looked around, trying to find out what had happened.

Dylan was standing about five feet away, rubbing one bare foot across the top of the other one. Karma was dancing around his ankles, mouth open in play and her tail bristled. "She bit me," Dylan said unnecessarily. Even from a few feet away, Alex could see the teeth marks on his foot.

"Karma, for God's sake." Alex leaned over and scooped her up. She squirmed in his hold, her little warm body trying to loosen itself from his grip. "Sorry, man. She's not

mean, she just plays hard.” He crossed the room to the three-story cage that stood against the far wall and deposited Karma inside. “You’re done for now, my friend.”

Play, Karma thought stubbornly. *Playplayplayplayplay... sleep*. And with that, she climbed into her hanging bed and curled into a very small ball.

If only his own life were that easy. Alex rolled his eyes at her and closed her cage.

Dylan was back to leaning against the wall. The marks on his foot had already begun to fade, thank goodness. Karma didn’t usually bite to wound, but she was still a carnivore and had the sharp teeth to prove it. Alex wondered how he could smooth things over.

“Sorry,” he offered again, studying Dylan’s foot. “You want a little ice or something?”

Dylan snorted a laugh. “I’m fine. I’ve gotten worse.”

Right. Animal control officer. Of course he’d gotten worse than a little ferret nip. Alex rolled his eyes at himself. “I bet you have. We can trade stories sometime. I got bit by a duck once.” He eyed Dylan’s foot again. “You sure you don’t want something for that?”

“Not for my foot. But I’ll take whatever you offer.” He smiled at Alex and somehow Dylan made the words sound really hot instead of slightly cheesy.

“I could maybe use a shower,” Alex suggested, glancing down at himself. The one he’d had earlier in the day had only served the purpose of letting Alex jack off before breakfast. Alex couldn’t even remember if he’d used shower gel on any part of his body other than his dick, and he knew for sure that he hadn’t washed his hair.

“Okay,” Dylan nodded. “Maybe in there you can think of something to offer me when you get out.”

Alex jerked his head up and stared. “Uh. I meant... you know, you could... um.” Shit, how had he managed to screw that one up so quickly?

Dylan’s eyes were twinkling and the now-familiar grin was tugging at the corners of his mouth. “You’re really gullible. I like it.”

He’d never thought of himself as gullible, and most of the time, Alex knew he wasn’t. He wasn’t young or stupid or inexperienced, and he usually knew when he was being teased. It just didn’t happen that often by people other than his sister. Especially not by hot, uniformed men who had eyes as green as grass.

“Take a shower with me,” Alex said with a grin. He’d save face if it killed him. “Take a shower with me and let me make up for the fact that my bitch of a ferret bit you.”

“Deal.” Dylan’s gaze raked over Alex’s body again in that way that made Alex want to blush, but fuck that shit. Enough blushing already.

He turned without another word and headed for the bathroom, assuming Dylan would follow. He stopped for a moment at the linen closet and took out two clean towels, then continued on his way to the shower.

They stripped down and Alex didn’t wait for the water to warm up before stepping into the tub. One of the things he longed to have one day was a separate tub and shower, but that was probably going to have to wait until he owned his own place. The apartments he’d lived in always had the traditional, too-small tub-shower combination. Fine for getting clean, not so fine for doing other things.

It didn’t seem to matter much to Dylan. He climbed in right behind Alex and ducked his head under the spray, using his fingers to scrub at his hair. “Tell me you like your showers warmer than this.”

“What, you don’t like the tepid water?” Alex chuckled and leaned against the tile. “It takes a couple of minutes. The joys of apartment living.” It occurred to him that he had no idea what kind of place Dylan lived in.

No information was forthcoming, however. All Dylan did was shrug and reach for Alex, pulling him in close and offering up the mouth that Alex couldn’t seem to get enough of.

They kissed for a really long time under the spray. Somehow Alex had thought they’d get right into the more physical stuff, since they’d already broken that barrier earlier. But Dylan seemed really into the kissing thing, which was totally fine with Alex.

The water finally grew warm and their skin warmed along with it. Alex could feel the slight chill leave Dylan’s arms and chest and turn into a low heat that seemed to emanate from more than just the water. And still they just kissed each other, Alex leaning on Dylan and Dylan on the wall, the shower spray falling down and clouds of steam beginning to rise around them.

When Alex was hard, even harder than he’d been the first time, he found himself sliding along Dylan’s hip before he was even aware of it. His cock rubbed and pushed at the hard thigh between his legs and he was gratified to feel Dylan’s erection pushing back.

The frustrating part was when Dylan didn’t seem to be in any kind of hurry. Alex’s cock was asking for more, a lot more, and since he was naked in a shower with another man’s hands on his ass, Alex didn’t really think that was an unreasonable request. “Please,” he finally murmured, tasting water droplets and Dylan’s mouth at the same time.

“Please what?” Dylan’s answering smile was lazy and his voice low.

“Oh, I don’t play games like that,” Alex warned, his hands traveling over and mapping Dylan’s chest. “Well, I do. But not right now.”

“Going slow is nice.” Dylan tunneled his fingers through Alex’s wet hair and wrapped the strands around his fingers, trapping Alex’s head in place. “You can learn that way.” And then he kissed Alex again, a long, slow seduction using lips and tongue and a very subtle grind of his hips.

Alex moaned into his mouth and forgot about going fast for a while. Kissing was nice. And oh, God, the way his prick slid just perfectly along Dylan’s hard thigh was nice, too, especially since he’d found a good little rhythm to work with. He knew he was leaning heavily against Dylan, but Alex wasn’t sure his knees were especially supportive at the moment.

When both of them were breathing hard and the bathroom was filled with steam, Alex decided he’d had enough of going slow. One small push had him out of Dylan’s grasp and sinking down to the tile floor. He didn’t pause to lick or nuzzle because the time for going slow was over. There might be another opportunity for it, but right now Alex wanted.

He opened his mouth when he found what he was after and swallowed Dylan’s cock with an open throat. The man was big, Alex knew that much from having Dylan’s prick in his hand earlier, and Alex had to relax to take him.

“Oh, hell,” came the whispered curse from above, and Alex would have smiled if not for the cock in his mouth.

Alex hummed softly and sucked, learning the texture and taste of something new. He loved going down on a guy for the first time because everyone was different; everyone liked something specific to them. Alex loved learning that part. He brought up one hand to cup Dylan’s balls and was rewarded with an intake of breath.

He pulled back to lick for a moment instead of suck and noticed for the first time a very small tattoo, below Dylan’s navel and just above the line of neatly trimmed hair. The number “34” in a bold font, no bigger than an inch. Alex paused for a second and studied it.

“Um,” Dylan said a minute later, rocking his hips up.

“God, sorry,” Alex laughed, making a mental note to ask Dylan what 34 stood for. Hopefully it wasn’t the number of months he’d spent in prison or something.

Getting back to the task he’d started, Alex moved a hand to Dylan’s hip and took his cock in again. He could taste Dylan at the tip and it was heady and sweet, a flavor that made Alex’s own prick leap in response. The urge to stroke himself off while he did this was

strong, but there would be time after he was finished with Dylan. Alex took his other hand and wrapped his fingers firmly around the base of Dylan's cock while he sucked.

When Dylan began rocking his hips harder and Alex could feel the man's dick swelling in his mouth, he knew Dylan was close. Alex's cock was leaking, he could feel the crystal drops mixing with the water that ran down his legs and over his groin, and his balls were getting higher and tighter by the second. Time to get serious.

Alex tightened the fingers he had around the base and dropped his head again. He went down low and swallowed Dylan as completely as he could, and when Dylan's cock hit the back of Alex's throat, he hummed again.

"Shit!" Dylan's toes curled into the unforgiving porcelain of the bathtub's floor just before he filled Alex's mouth with more of the faintly sweet spunk he'd leaked before. Dylan's hands went flat against the tiles behind him as he shook, and Alex let go of the man's dick in order to use both hands to pin him firmly in place.

As soon as he thought Dylan could stand on his own, Alex let go and sank back on his heels. He lowered his head and took himself in his hand. God, third orgasm of the day, and it was coming up fast. Alex panted as he stroked himself and squeezed his eyes shut tight.

"No, I want to," Dylan was suddenly murmuring in his ear, and then there were two of them on the tub floor and Dylan shoved Alex's hand away. "Let me."

There was no argument to be had, especially not when Alex's stomach clenched and his balls got even tighter. "Oh God, thank you," he gasped, shoving through Dylan's hand and clutching at his wrist. "God, just like--" and then he was coming, shuddering on the floor of the shower and spilling over Dylan's fist.

The water raining on them from above took care of most of the clean-up, for which Alex was grateful. He couldn't stand up at the moment, but Dylan seemed content to curl up next to him on the uncomfortable bottom of the tub. "Should get up," Alex mumbled, his face pressed into Dylan's shoulder.

"Eventually. I expect the water gets cold, doesn't it?"

"Yeah." Alex laughed. "But we have another five minutes or so before that happens."

"Oh, then we're good." Dylan grinned and dropped a kiss to Alex's head. "I don't mind shampooing in cold water."

Alex groaned. "Okay, okay. Getting up." But he didn't.

They did eventually drag themselves off the floor when the water turned lukewarm and Alex's skin pebbled with goosebumps. They each had a fast shampoo, discarded the

thought of conditioner, and when towels were wrapped around both of their waists, Alex couldn't help yawning. "God. I don't usually do this much this early in the day."

"It's after one," Dylan said with an arched brow. "What time do you get up after working all night?"

"One," Alex admitted sheepishly. "I come home, shower, eat, and go to bed. I've already had a full day."

"Back to bed, then," Dylan said, and somehow Alex knew that the firm tone he used was his officer voice. "At least two more hours sleep."

He considered arguing, but then a yawn nearly split his jaw in two. "Okay," Alex sighed. "Does this mean you're leaving?"

"It depends on whether or not you can sleep with me here." Dylan leaned a hip on the bathroom counter and looked delightfully young with his hair wet and mussed.

"I can sleep through a nuclear holocaust." Alex blinked heavily and swayed a little. Yup, definitely not enough sleep.

Dylan pushed off the counter and took Alex by the arm. Dylan steered him out of the bathroom and straight through the bedroom to the unmade bed. "In you go. I'll stay."

Alex nodded and climbed in bed. He was vaguely aware of Dylan dropping his towel and climbing in after him, but then there was just warmth and sleep.

When he woke up again, Alex could tell it was late afternoon by the way the sun made slanted shadows on his chocolate-brown duvet. God, he hadn't really meant to sleep more than another ninety minutes or so, but a full breakfast and three orgasms in one day after a full night of work had really knocked him out.

Way to make a first impression on the guy Alex was trying to... well, impress.

Except the guy Alex was trying to impress seemed to have vacated the premises. Alex didn't have to look to know the spot next to him in bed was empty. He lay very still, eyes closed, and listened to the sound of the apartment. Maybe Dylan had gotten up to take a piss or get a drink of water or something.

The only thing Alex could hear was the quiet rasping of Macavity's tongue over a paw as he washed his face. Alex opened his eyes and turned his head to see the cat sitting on his dresser, just like always. Macavity paused in his grooming and looked back, blinking.

"Karma bit him," Alex informed the cat. "Of course the guy's not going to stick around."

Macavity flicked his tail and went back to washing a paw. Karma wasn't the cat's favorite creature in the house, so Alex wasn't surprised when he got a faint vibe of *Karma pest Karma eat*.

"You're not going to eat Karma," Alex warned, although he wasn't worried. Karma was too fast and too wily to be caught by the overweight, aging cat. Macavity never really tried that hard, anyway.

He rolled out of bed and pulled on a pair of loose gym shorts. Trying not to be too disappointed at the lack of Dylan, Alex wandered to the kitchen to see if he had anything in his refrigerator that would make an acceptable dinner before he had to go back to work.

The note on the table caught his attention before he'd even gotten to the kitchen doorway.

Alex,

My shift starts at four. Didn't have the heart to wake you up again. When's your next free night? Breakfast is good, but dinner is, too.

D

Well. Dinner was always good.

Chapter Five

Dinner turned out to be very good, indeed.

Dylan knew of a small vegetarian Mexican restaurant that was just outside the city. They met for a late supper on a night that neither of them worked. Alex had never been there, but as soon as he tasted his eggplant and feta enchiladas, he was sold.

“Oh my God, good,” he mumbled around a mouthful of food.

Dylan lit up. “Yeah? I haven’t actually been here before. My dad’s wife likes it, though.” He tried a small bite of his potato tamale, then a bigger one. “Hey. This stuff’s good.”

Alex chuckled and took a pull of his beer. “People never think vegetarian can be good. So, your dad’s wife. That’s not your mom, I take it.”

“Nah, he remarried a few years ago. My mom’s out in Ohio with some boyfriend or other. I don’t remember if this is the wrestler or the truck driver. I can’t keep track.”

He sounded light, but Alex watched Dylan take a long sip of his water and shrug a little, as if to make it less painful than it seemed to be. “My parents are still married. That’s weird, huh?” It was rare, in any case.

“That’s cool.” Dylan smiled and forked up another bite of tamale with rice. “How long?”

“Twenty-five years this past summer. We had a surprise party for them.”

“We. You and... your sister?”

His enchiladas were spicier after a few bites. Alex finished his beer and nodded to the server when she asked if he wanted another. “Uh-huh. Tabitha and me.”

“You all get along.” It wasn’t a question.

Alex nodded. “That’s as weird as my parents staying married this long, right? Most of my friends don’t even talk to their parents, or if they do, their mom and dad are divorced and they haven’t seen them in the same room in years.”

The corner of Dylan’s mouth quirked up. “That’s my family life in a nutshell.”

“Sorry.” Alex said it simply, and he meant it. He wasn’t feeling sorry for the guy, he was just sorry that Dylan didn’t have the kind of family he was close to. Alex knew there weren’t many people who did.

Dylan wiped his mouth and dropped his napkin next to his empty plate. “Actually, it’s okay. It’s been like that for so long that I don’t know any different. And I get along with

my father and Caroline. My brothers and I all keep in touch, even though none of them live here. It's not too bad."

"What do you do for holidays?" Alex had many, many memories of Thanksgivings and Christmases at the house he'd grown up in. Aunts and uncles and cousins filled the hallways and dining room table, and his Aunt Amy always brought her stupid little terrier that thought *bite bite bite* at Alex the entire time. Alex loved it all.

"Work, usually. Dad and Caroline head to Vermont for ski season. I visited my oldest brother in Oregon one year, but other than that, I just work. Makes it easy on the guys with families."

Alex nodded as if to agree, but in truth, it sounded terribly lonely to him. "Holidays are overrated anyway." He didn't actually believe that, but the moment was a little awkward and he was trying to gloss over it.

They each had their own dessert and Alex offered a bite of his flan when Dylan looked curiously at it. "Want to try? It's like a custard, sort of. Only not as smooth." There was no good way to describe the texture of flan.

Dylan swallowed the small bite from Alex's fork. He looked to be keeping his face carefully neutral as he said, "Huh. So that's flan."

Alex snorted and took a big bite of his own dessert. "You don't have to like it," he laughed. "A lot of people don't. It's kind of an acquired taste."

"I don't like it," Dylan admitted, taking a drink of water and then scooping up the last of his fried ice cream. "I expected it to be like pudding and it wasn't."

"Nope. It's not as creamy. I love it, but I've grown up with it, so. My grandma had her own recipe."

That topic resulted in another twenty minute discussion of their favorite family recipes, and by the time they'd paid the check and walked out into the cool night air, Alex had notes in his pocket on how to make a great vegetarian pot pie and he'd given Dylan the name of a really good down-home cookbook that Alex's mom used all the time.

When they were standing around in the parking lot by their respective cars, Alex realized that Dylan was waiting for him to sort of lead by example and say what he wanted to do next. That was a change; usually the guys he went out with either never asked him, or took charge immediately.

Then again, Alex realized, this was a Date. He didn't often go on Dates.

"It's kinda early," Alex said, shoving his hands in his jean pockets and hunching his shoulders against the light breeze that had kicked up. "What do you want to do?"

“Go to bed with you.”

Alex blinked and wasn't surprised when his cock responded immediately by starting to firm up inside his boxers. “Okay.”

Dylan laughed and moved in close to Alex, close enough that Alex could smell the faintly spicy aftershave Dylan had used. “I was kidding. Well, no, I wasn't. I do want to go to bed with you. Again. A lot. But I was thinking maybe we could hang out first. I don't know, you want to see a movie or something?”

“Sure. We could.” Alex shrugged and tried to think of the new releases that were out. Anything with George Clooney and he'd end up jerking off in the theater restroom, so that wasn't an option. Somehow seeing a movie didn't really appeal to him right now. “Hey,” he said slowly, mulling over an idea that had just occurred to him. “I know what we could do. You up for a little love of the four-legged, furry variety?”

“I won't read anything kinky into that,” Dylan grinned. “Sure, what do you have in mind?”

“I'll drive. We'll come back to get your car.” Alex gave his keys a little toss in the air and then caught them.

Dylan nodded and opened Alex's passenger side door. “Sure, man.” He slid easily into the car and buckled his seat belt.

Not for the first time, Alex realized how easy and mellow Dylan was. No pressure, no anxiety, just calm. It was nice. Alex couldn't read humans the way he could animals, and he was glad for it. There was no way he'd want to know what some people were actually thinking. But he still had the feeling that if he could do that, he'd be spending most of his time around people like Dylan.

Alex opened his own door and got behind the wheel. He gestured at his mp3 player that was hooked up to his car stereo. “Find whatever you want on there,” he offered. “It's got everything.”

Dylan scrolled through Alex's music as Alex drove along. He let one or two songs play through the opening bars before clicking away from them, finally settling on some Bob Seger. He relaxed back into his seat and drummed his fingers on his jeans. “Do we have to go far?”

“Nope. Almost there.” They were, too, just one more right-hand turn.

Dylan eyed the familiar building and then glanced at Alex. “We're going... to your work?”

“Close. Next door.”

The building next door to the clinic was the county animal shelter. Alex had no doubt that Dylan was familiar with it and had probably been there many times with animals he’d picked up on a shift. But Alex knew the officers didn’t bother stopping to spend any time with the pets that were up for adoption. They just didn’t have time to do that on a busy shift.

They parked and got out of the car. Dylan didn’t ask any more questions and Alex was again struck by how easygoing the guy was. He followed Alex quietly, looking over at the dog kennels as Alex unlocked the shelter doors and disarmed the alarm system.

Alex went straight to the small animal room and flipped the light on. Immediately he was barraged with a cacophony of *out out no cage out pet pet come out?* The cats punctuated their desperation to come out of their cages with short, questioning meows. The rabbits made no audible sound, but they were definitely in tandem with their thoughts of *hop hop stretch legs exercise hop*.

“Okay,” Alex soothed them, unlatching the cats’ cages first. “One species at a time. Felines first, then bunnies.” He ignored the rodents along the back wall, because they never cared about coming out.

Dylan stood in the middle of the floor with a half-smile on his face. “We’re going to play with the animals?” he asked, watching the cats come to circle around his legs.

“Yeah. Um, is that cool?” Alex had a moment of doubt. Maybe he’d been wrong, and Dylan wanted to stay as far away from animals as possible when he wasn’t working. “I mean, I know you see them all the time.”

“Totally cool.” Dylan sat down on the floor and let the five cats sniff him with their delicate noses and twitching whiskers. Their vibes were a jumble of *smell sniff sniff rub make the stranger smell like us rub sniff*, but Alex knew that was no different from how they usually responded to someone new.

Alex sat down on the floor as well. “We can take them into the playroom if you want,” he offered. The room filled with carpeted cat trees was a kitty’s paradise.

“Ouch. Stop that.” Dylan gently lifted a small calico from his lap who had begun to unsheathe her claws as she kneaded his leg. He looked up at Alex and shrugged. “If you want. I’m good here. They seem happy.”

And indeed, the rumble of different purrs was coming from several cats as they circled and butted their heads against Dylan. *Pet. Pet. Scratch ears. Pet.*

“Scratch behind Pansy’s ears.” Alex indicated the little calico that Dylan had detached from his jeans. “She’ll follow you home.”

Dylan obeyed and then chuckled when Pansy's eyes closed and she slithered down to the floor in a purring heap. "She's sweet."

Alex surreptitiously watched Dylan as the cats climbed on him. He seemed completely at ease with the felines and they were equally as comfortable, if their rhythmic purring was any indication. Of course, the gentle vibe of *friend* that was present in the room was the best indicator of all. Alex trusted animals' instincts a thousand times more than he did his own.

They let the cats have their freedom for another thirty minutes before rounding them all up one by one and depositing them back into their cages. Alex tried to tune out the chorus of protests he was hearing. He hated that the cats all had to live in such small spaces for most of their lives.

"I'm sorry," he told Jezebel, a big, black girl with a tuxedo front. "Don't be so mad."

"She looks okay to me," Dylan laughed, and indeed, for all intents and purposes, Jezebel looked as content as could be as she settled down on her little blue cat bed.

Alex could hear her real thoughts about it, however. *Cage*, she was thinking at him, and the undercurrent of her tone was complete disgust. *Trapped. Cage.*

"I try to come when I can and take them out." Alex sighed and moved away from Jezebel's line of sight, though he could still hear her. "At least this is a no-kill shelter. But everyone always wants the kittens."

"Kittens are cute." Dylan shrugged and went to examine the rabbits. "I always had a thing for bunnies, though."

"Oh yeah? You should adopt one." Alex unhooked the door to the cage of a medium-sized lop and reached in. The rabbit froze and Alex caught the familiar *predator!* alarm that the rabbits were always thinking.

Dylan looked doubtful. "I don't know too much about rabbits, except that the wild ones always think they can get across the road faster than a car." He rolled his eyes and Alex snorted in agreement.

"Yeah. We see at least one a week in the clinic. But the house rabbits are different. Here, hold Hamlet." He scruffed the lop and ignored it when the rabbit's alarm call increased to dramatic levels. *Freeze freeze don't move don't get spotted don't move!*

"I want to pet you, not eat you," he informed Hamlet. Alex made sure the rabbit's back legs were supported and then handed the warm bundle over to Dylan. "Sit on the floor with him; he likes to be in people's laps. Pet his ears."

Dylan did as instructed while Alex went and released the other two rabbits, Macbeth and Ophelia. They didn't give off as much of a terrified vibe as Hamlet had, and once they were on the floor they hopped around gleefully and twitched pink noses.

"I like rabbits." Dylan's voice was quiet as he stroked Hamlet's fur.

"I'm telling you, you should adopt one. They're easy and quiet. And litter-trained," he added as an afterthought. "At least, these guys all are."

Hamlet settled more firmly into Dylan's lap and Alex saw Dylan smile. "Rabbits can be litter-trained. That's handy."

"Very. See? Easy. And clean, and quiet. Get a rabbit."

Dylan chuckled. "I'll keep it in mind."

They let the rabbits hop around for about twenty minutes before collecting them again and depositing them back into their cages. Alex was amused by the palpable relief he could feel from the bunnies, despite the fact that he knew they liked to come out for exercise.

He looked around and found Dylan still sitting on the floor, his back against the wall. Dylan's gaze traveled up and around the room. "It's pretty quiet in here at night."

"Yup. I like being alone with the animals." Alex flipped the main light off and watched as the room was instantly flooded with moonlight. The rounded curve of a full moon was visible through the long windows behind the animal cages.

Dylan remained on the floor with the now-familiar half grin on his face. "Come on down here with me."

Alex raised a brow. "You know," he mused, walking over to where Dylan sat and dropping down to his knees, "for an officer, you like to break rules."

A low chuckle filled the space between them. "I don't even carry a gun. But that dog restraint pole can bruise." Dylan reached for Alex and encouraged him to straddle Dylan's hips.

Alex's cock leapt to attention with amazing speed as soon as the crotch of his jeans came into contact with Dylan's groin. He reached down and cupped Dylan's cock over the denim. "That's what you call this? A dog restraint pole?"

Again, Alex was rewarded with a soft laugh. "I call that Big Ben," Dylan murmured.

It was Alex's turn to laugh, but the sound got muffled by Dylan leaning forward to kiss him. Their mouths met easily, with none of the hesitation that they'd shown at the

beginning, and Alex liked the growing familiarity. He couldn't help wondering if this was a "relationship" yet, or if it was still just messing around. Either one was okay with Alex. For the time being, anyway.

Alex was just starting to enjoy the slow grind they were making against each other when everything turned upside down and he found himself on his back with Dylan smiling down at him. "You stay there," Dylan instructed, and slid down Alex's body.

He lifted his head to see what was going on, but dropped it back down to the ground with a thunk when a hot, wet mouth engulfed his cock. Alex gasped and threaded his fingers through Dylan's hair. He hadn't even felt Dylan working his zipper. "You--" was all he managed to say before having to suck in a breath.

Dylan grinned around Alex's dick and bobbed his head down once. "Me," he whispered when he pulled off, and Alex flattened the palm of one hand against the floor.

The guys he'd dated and had flings with had never really been into oral. They liked getting it, sure. Who didn't? But Alex had never found a guy who *loved* giving blowjobs. Even the ones who'd been fairly good at it were always quick and sloppy and they rarely swallowed. Alex hadn't minded too much. He always got off, whether it was by hand or mouth or ass, so he'd never thought to complain.

Getting head was never going to be the same again.

Alex lay on the floor of the shelter and tried not to embarrass himself by coming in the next five seconds. It wasn't an easy task, seeing as how Dylan was doing everything exactly right: smooth, gliding downstrokes, strong, sucking upstrokes, and an occasional sweep of his tongue around the head of Alex's cock. It was all perfect.

The steady sucking stopped for a minute and then there was just Dylan's tongue curling over the head and lapping at the liquid that Alex knew he was leaking everywhere. Alex couldn't help arching and tightening the hand he had in Dylan's hair into a fist, though he tried to relax.

"It's okay," Dylan whispered against the hot skin of Alex's cock. He lapped at the head again and petted Alex's hip with one hand, fingers trailing against flesh and making goosebumps rise on Alex's arms.

It was all the permission Alex needed. He tangled his fingers around the short strands of Dylan's hair and rocked up again into Dylan's mouth. His balls were already tightening and lifting and Alex was pretty sure that he was going to embarrass himself despite his fervent wishes not to, but the urgent need to come was quickly encompassing everything else.

Dylan had gone back to the steady, persistent, sucking pulls that were making Alex crazy. Alex lifted his head to watch and saw Dylan's cheeks hollow a little on the upstroke. That

alone would have been enough to make Alex blow, but then when Dylan got a hand in there to cup and roll Alex's balls, his orgasm was a sure thing.

Dylan swallowed hard and the contractions around Alex's dick sent Alex over. He lifted his hips off the floor and groaned low in his chest. Alex's cock pulsed and he could feel the warm spurts dribble out into Dylan's mouth. Dylan didn't pull away like others had, but instead used his tongue to lick and clean eagerly.

When Alex had recovered enough to open his eyes and blink dazedly at the ceiling, he realized that Dylan was breathing hard and fumbling for his own fly while still kneeling over Alex. Whoops, clearly the guy needed a little relief and possibly some assistance.

"Sorry," Alex whispered, and reached for him.

Dylan grunted his appreciation when Alex managed to free the man's prick from his jeans, and Dylan balanced on all fours over Alex while Alex stroked him. "Oh fuck, please," Dylan gasped, his arms shaking from the strain of holding himself up.

His cock was firm and solid and warm in Alex's hand, with just a dab of clear fluid at the tip. Alex jacked him steadily, knowing there was no lube but figuring Dylan would say something if it was too rough, and then before he could ponder that any further there was a hot throbbing of flesh in Alex's hand and then Dylan came.

Alex scrabbled for the edge of his own t-shirt with his left hand, and with his right milked Dylan's cock so that the ropy strands of come fell directly onto Alex's stomach. Dylan panted and shook and Alex saw him watching how his spunk painted Alex's belly.

There was no way Dylan was expected to stay upright after that, so as soon as the man stopped shaking and quivering, Alex tugged on one of Dylan's biceps and Dylan collapsed with a grunt. "Christ."

"Mmm." Alex agreed sleepily and wrapped both arms around the warm body on top of him. Somewhere behind him there was an annoyed cat thinking *quiet can't sleep can't sleep noise*, but Alex didn't much care at the moment. Cats slept twenty-three damn hours a day, anyway.

"Sweet," Dylan mumbled into Alex's neck.

"Huh?" Alex tilted his head a little, trying to see Dylan's face.

Dylan lifted his head and smiled. "Sweet. You taste really sweet, sweeter than anyone else I've been with."

On the rare occasion when Alex had had a lover who had swallowed during a blowjob, they had often said the same thing. "Um. Yeah, it's... heh. I think it's the vegetarian thing? I try to stay away from the more bitter vegetables and eat the leafy greens. Oh, and

fruit, of course.” He felt himself blush. Until now, Alex had always thought that was an old wives’ tale, but since Dylan had made mention of the fact that Alex’s come was sweet, Alex was inclined to believe it.

Dylan grinned, teeth flashing white in the half-darkness. “Sweet,” he repeated, and then leaned in for a kiss.

Their mouths met with soft tongues and Alex reached down and searched for one of Dylan’s hands. Their fingers tangled together and Alex was again struck by how good a kisser Dylan was. Seemed like the boy was good at most things oral, which was an extremely pleasant surprise.

Alex was just realizing that Dylan was lying in a sticky puddle of his own come and thought perhaps they might want to get up off the floor when he heard a sound that made him freeze. “Oh, shit.”

Dylan lifted his head and looked down at him curiously. “What?”

The overhead lights flickering on answered that question. Alex stared up into Dylan’s green eyes and stayed absolutely still. He swallowed hard and prayed harder.

“Are we in trouble?” Dylan murmured.

Chapter Six

Oh, yes. Chances were good that they were definitely in trouble.

Alex tilted his head and looked upside-down at the door, wondering if they had time to scramble apart. There would still be the tell-tale sticky spot between them, but maybe it could be covered up by--

“Hey!”

Alex stifled a groan and gave Dylan a gentle push. Of all the fucking people to walk into the shelter, it had to be Gordon. It couldn't have been Maisey, the sweet but clueless older woman who helped run the shelter. It couldn't have been Chad, the quiet guy who Alex thought might be gay. No, it had to be Gordon, the twenty-year-old son of the biggest donor in town.

Gordon Sheer's father was dead and his mother drank and played tennis. She also donated frequently to the animal shelter and carried around two ridiculous teacup Chihuahuas in her purse. Alex didn't see her that often and for that he was grateful, mostly because the Chihuahuas were always giving off a *help* vibe that Alex found incredibly disturbing. He was pretty sure they weren't being abused or anything, but they always seemed so despairing of their situation.

Gordon was a prick, plain and simple. He pretended to “volunteer” at the shelter, but Alex knew he just liked to swagger in and remind people that the whole place was kept alive mainly by his mother's money. He didn't actually like the animals and they didn't like him. Even now, Alex was getting distinct waves of dislike radiating from the cats' cages in the back of the room.

“The fuck are you doing, Myers?” Gordon stared down at the two of them entwined on the floor. There was no mistaking the look of disgust.

“Checking on the animals,” Alex answered, giving him a sweet smile.

Dylan slid off Alex and got to his feet, hands automatically going into his back pockets and his head tilted curiously. He remained silent, for which Alex was grateful. Alex didn't know Dylan well enough yet to determine how the man would react to Gordon.

“Bullshit.” Gordon sneered at Alex, ignoring Dylan completely.

Alex realized he was still lying on the floor and got up slowly. He folded his arms and stared at Gordon. “And what if it is?”

“Then I'll happen to mention to my mother that the vet tech who works at the clinic and shelter was screwing around after hours on the shelter floor. With a guy. I don't think she'd keep donating money to a place that has employees like you.” There was emphasis

on the ‘you’ part, and Alex was unsure if that was a dig at his sexual orientation. Knowing Gordon, it probably was.

The shitty part was that Gordon was right. Pamela Sheer was as distasteful as her son and would most likely withdraw any funding she was liable to provide to the shelter that so needed it. Alex ground his jaw and stared at Gordon. “So what the hell do you want me to do?”

Gordon cleared his throat and shifted his feet, eyeing Dylan again. Alex found a perverse sense of satisfaction that Dylan’s presence was making Gordon uncomfortable. “I want you to tell whoever does the hiring over there at your clinic that I want a job. Put in a good word for me and I won’t tell my mother to hold onto her precious money.”

Alex blinked. “You want a *job*? At the clinic?” Gordon didn’t have to work; money poured out of his mother’s purse like water.

“Sure.” Gordon shrugged. “I like animals.”

There was no way Alex could control his disdainful snort. He knew Gordon didn’t like animals the same way Alex knew the animals hated him. Just the fact that the cats were crouching at the very back of their cages with their ears flattened told Alex what he needed to know. Of course, the steady vibe of *hide don’t like hide hide* was also a good clue.

“You don’t think I like animals?” Gordon arched a brow and darted another glance in Dylan’s direction.

He didn’t want to argue the point. “Sure, whatever. I’ll put in a good word for you over there. But I don’t have anything to do with the hiring.” Alex wasn’t too concerned about it; he didn’t really think Gordon would be able to secure a job there with little to no animal experience and no willingness to learn. Dr. Hutchins was the one who interviewed and hired all the techs, and Alex liked him because he was perceptive and smart. There wasn’t a good chance the doctor would hire Gordon.

“See that you do,” Gordon smirked. “I’ll check on that.” He gave one more look at Dylan and then turned to go.

“Fucking prick,” Alex muttered under his breath, but not quietly enough.

Gordon stopped in the doorway and looked back. “What was that, Myers?”

Oh, what the hell. They already hated each other. “I said,” Alex enunciated, “you’re a fucking prick.”

He thought he might have heard Dylan laugh, but Alex suddenly found himself propelled into the far wall by a furious Gordon. The cages that held the rabbits rattled loudly and

the bunnies startled. Their large feet thumped against the wire bottoms of their cages and Alex's head exploded with distress vibes.

HIDE ENEMY RUN FEAR TERROR RUN HIDE HIDE ENEMY CLOSE HIDE

Alex thought he probably could have gotten it together enough to at least push Gordon off him, but the rabbits were too distressed and Alex's head was reeling. He could only stand, pinned against the wall, while Gordon got in Alex's face with an enraged expression.

"You think I'm the prick, Myers? You think I'm the asshole, you disgusting hom-- erk!"

It took Alex a minute to figure out what had happened to his attacker. His headache blossomed into a pounding and the rabbits' anxiety had not abated. He was still being flooded with their silent alarm and Alex had to press the heels of his hands into his eyes in an effort to quiet the noise that no one else could hear.

When he dropped his hands, it felt like it had been ten minutes but had probably only been more like ten seconds. Alex blinked to clear his vision and then Gordon and Dylan came into view.

Dylan had Gordon on the floor, flat on his stomach. Dylan sat on the younger man's back with one of Gordon's arms drawn up behind him and the other pinned underneath his own body. The look on Dylan's face hadn't changed; he still appeared perfectly calm and almost a bit amused.

"Let me up, you bastard," Gordon gasped. He struggled beneath Dylan's weight but was unable to dislodge him.

"Not yet." Dylan sounded pleasant and mild. "I'm not hurting you." There was something implied underneath his words that Alex chose to interpret as "but I could if I wanted to".

Alex pushed off the wall when he was sure he could stand without wobbling. "It's okay," he said to Dylan. "You can let him up." Already, Alex was having visions of Gordon stomping off to his mother and demanding that she withdraw her funding.

"It's not okay. He attacked you." Dylan glanced up at Alex and then back down to Gordon. Alex thought he might have tightened his hold on the other man a little bit, but Alex couldn't be sure. "What I should do is arrest him."

"You can do that?" Alex hadn't thought animal control officers were able to make arrests.

Dylan shook his head at Alex and winked, but spoke in the affirmative. "Sure. I didn't bring my cuffs, though."

Gordon had gone very still underneath Dylan's body and Alex had to bite down hard on the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. Dylan didn't carry cuffs or a firearm, and obviously wasn't able to make an arrest, but there was nothing illegal about letting Gordon think differently.

"No," Alex said slowly, as if thinking about it. "Don't. Let him up. He was just angry." Alex hoped he sounded magnanimous, then realized Gordon wouldn't care anyway.

Dylan moved off of Gordon but kept the other man's arm bent behind him. "You'll get up carefully and move away from both of us," he said easily. "If you come near Alex again or threaten him in any way, I won't be as forgiving. Hear?" His voice was low and calm and Alex understood why animals reacted so well to Dylan just from hearing that soothing tone.

Gordon gave a curt nod.

"I said, hear?" Dylan hadn't let up on his grip.

"Hear," Gordon growled, and then Dylan let him go.

Alex forced himself not to take an instinctual step back when Gordon scrambled up and balled both hands into fists. Dylan just stood calmly, watching Gordon, but Alex had the sensation that Dylan was more than ready to drop the man to the floor if necessary.

Gordon's gaze passed between Dylan and Alex one more time, distaste radiating from him. "You get me that job, Myers," he snapped. "And maybe I won't tell anyone I found you fucking around with your boyfriend in here." He backed toward the door and then was gone. Alex heard a car start up outside, but he didn't relax until headlights had passed through the window and disappeared.

His head still pounded and the floor looked inviting. Alex knelt down shakily and then sat cross-legged, running a hand through his hair. "That guy sucks."

Dylan was next to him in an instant. "He does suck. And he's wrong."

"I know." Alex nodded. "You're not my boyfriend."

The answering low chuckle was soothing to Alex's throbbing head. "Not that. Although, hey. He's not really wrong there, except now's not the time to discuss it." Dylan leaned in close and nuzzled Alex, then took one of Alex's hands between both of his own and held it tight. "He said you were a prick and an asshole and he called you disgusting. He's wrong. You're beautiful." Another nuzzle and then a soft kiss made Alex melt.

"Not beautiful," he mumbled. His cheeks were pink, he could tell by the way they were suddenly extra-warm. Maybe the lack of light in the room would hide it.

“Of course you are.” Dylan said it so matter-of-factly that Alex was almost inclined to believe him. “I’ll show you. Just not here.”

God, definitely not here. Alex nodded and took a deep breath. His headache had receded to a low throbbing just behind his eyes, so he was sure he could stand and walk without help. “Yeah. We better go.”

Dylan helped him up and then studied Alex critically. “Are you all right?” he asked, his brow furrowed. “I mean, I know he slammed you into the wall, but did he hurt you somewhere else?”

Alex made a huge effort to grin. He knew he probably looked pale and shaky, as always after an overload of stimulation from several animals at once. But somehow Alex didn’t think the time was right to say to Dylan, “Hey, I can sense and hear animals’ thoughts. Wanna fuck?”

What he actually said was, “I’m good, I think I just knocked my head against the wall. I’ll take a couple of Tylenol at home. With a beer.”

There was a moment when Alex didn’t think Dylan was going to let it go, but eventually he said, “All right. Come on, I’ll drive.”

There was indeed Tylenol and beer when they got back to Alex’s place. Dylan pointed to the couch and Alex sat with a laugh. “I’m fine, I promise.”

“Of course you are. I’ll make myself feel better by making you sit there, though. So sit there.” Dylan winked at him and went to the fridge for two chilled beer bottles.

“I’m sitting, I’m sitting.” Alex laughed and leaned his head back, studying the ceiling. A medium-sized spider was weaving a new web in the highest corner.

Busybusybusy, the spider was thinking, and it made Alex smile. He liked listening to insects, when he could actually hear them. They were extremely single-minded and their brains were too small to understand when there was imminent danger, so they rarely sounded an alarm call.

The couch cushion dipped and Alex looked up to see Dylan settling in next to him. “Here. Down the hatch.” He handed over three Tylenol tablets and a beer.

Alex swallowed the pills dutifully and leaned his head back again, turning so he could see Dylan. “Thanks. Sorry about that.”

“Whatever. Not a big deal.” Dylan shrugged. “Who the hell was that guy, anyway?”

Alex gave him a brief rundown of who Gordon was and why Alex had agreed to put in a good word for him over at the clinic.

Dylan looked doubtful. "Why does he think you can get him a job, and are they stupid enough to give him one?"

"Because they like me there and Gordon knows it. And no, I don't think so. Not after I tell Dr. Hutchins what happened. Gordon's even more of an idiot than I thought if he really thinks I'll be singing his praises. I hate that guy."

"Looks like he hates you, too."

"Looks like. But I'm not worried about me, I'm worried about the shelter."

Dylan gave him a long look. "Then I guess I'll have to worry about you."

The swallow of beer he'd just taken went down the wrong way. Alex coughed and sputtered for a moment and then set his bottle on the coffee table. "Pardon?"

"Someone has to worry about you," Dylan repeated. "Since you're not worried about yourself. So I can do it." His eyes were warm.

"Oh," was all Alex could think of to say.

Dylan put his bottle next to Alex's and slid over on the sofa until his thigh was pressed up against Alex's. "Good, you're not an arguer." He leaned in and nuzzled Alex's cheek.

He did tend to argue sometimes, especially with his sister, but now was definitely not the time to protest. Not when his dick was stirring -- again -- and Dylan's warm breath was ghosting over his cheek and ear.

Alex turned to face Dylan on the couch and pulled up one leg. "Want you," he murmured, seeking a kiss. "Want to feel you."

Dylan nodded and leaned back against the couch, tugging Alex with him. "Want you," he echoed. He kept pulling and tugging until Alex was on top of him, straddling Dylan's hips and Dylan's hands splayed across Alex's ass. "There. Yes."

"Yes." Alex leaned down and kissed Dylan hard. One of his hands snaked behind Dylan's neck to hold the man's head in place, but Alex needn't have worried. Dylan moaned and settled in and didn't look like he'd be going anywhere. Alex's fingers tightened in his hair anyway.

They kissed like that for a long time, and somewhere along the way their shirts got stripped off. Bare skin brushed and touched and Alex was reminded of high school, making out like teenagers, except this was so, so much better. Dylan's chest was broad

and warm and Alex wanted to lick it. He would have, too, except tearing his mouth away from Dylan's was harder than he thought, so Alex contented himself with skimming gentle fingers over the skin instead.

Dylan sighed and shifted under him. His hips pushed up the slightest bit and Alex answered by rocking into him, pressing their jean-covered erections together and making both of them groan. "Want," Alex whispered. He thought there might be something more to that sentence, but that was all he could formulate. "Dylan. Want."

Dylan nodded and pushed up again. One hand grasped and clutched at Alex's hip while his other hand came up to brush against Alex's piercing. Alex gasped as the unexpected shard of pleasure traveled down through his stomach to his balls.

Someday, they were going to spend time just necking on the couch, because Good Lord, the man knew how to kiss. Alex wanted to swallow him whole. But that day wasn't today. Alex wanted more, he wanted to move and stretch and feel, and he wanted Dylan naked and warm next to him.

It was a near-impossible task, but somehow Alex managed to disentangle himself from Dylan's wandering hands and get up off the couch. He looked down at Dylan, bare-chested and mussed, and very nearly climbed right back on top of him. Only the thought of being naked and flat on a bed forced Alex to stay where he was and hold out a hand.

"Where are we going?" Dylan twinkled up at him and tilted his head.

Alex wiggled the fingers of the hand he was holding out. "I'm kicking you out. Date's over."

"Good, I'm meeting my other date after this anyway." Dylan chuckled and took Alex's hand.

They walked together into Alex's bedroom. The only light was from Violet's heat lamp, so Alex left it that way. Macavity sat in his usual place on top of Alex's dresser.

No sleep. Play. Play. Nighttime. Play.

"I don't think so, bud." Alex let go of Dylan's hand long enough to pick up the cat and toss him out of the bedroom. Macavity stalked away, radiating waves of haughty feline disgust.

"He could have stayed. It wouldn't have bothered me."

"It would have bothered me." Alex raised a brow and shook his head. There'd been one time when he'd brought someone home and he hadn't realized Macavity had still been in the bedroom. It became apparent to Alex when he started getting vibes of annoyance from the cat and had been unable to finish the guy's blowjob. There wasn't a second date,

and now Alex always made sure the bedroom was free of four-legged critters before any kind of sex.

He paused to ensure the door was latched and when Alex turned around again, he drew in a breath. Dylan had stripped down and now knelt naked in the middle of Alex's bed, cock jutting proud and hard from his body. The shadows from the light over Violet's tank fell onto the planes of Dylan's muscles, sculpting them and making them stand out in sharp relief. His tattoo was just barely visible and Alex made another mental note to ask Dylan about it. Later.

Now, all Alex wanted to do was touch him.

He crossed the room in two strides and crawled onto the bed. Dylan reached for Alex immediately, hands going to the button fly of Alex's jeans and mouth searching for kisses. "You're dressed. Why are you dressed? I'm not dressed."

Alex chuckled and tried to help Dylan, no easy task when his cock was like steel and making it difficult to get rid of his pants. "I'm trying not to be dressed."

Then, finally, there were no more clothes. They lay together and kissed deeply. Alex moved against Dylan's warmth, seeking more while at the same time perfectly content to let Dylan pet and kiss him for hours. His dick seemed to have other ideas. Already, Alex could feel fluid beading at the tip. Dylan's cock was leaving silvery cool trails on Alex's skin, his hips making a gentle, rolling rhythm.

It occurred to Alex that no one had really touched him like this before. He'd been with plenty of guys, not to mention a couple of girls while he figured himself out along the way, but Alex had never had... a lover. Someone who touched him like they were focused only on him, like they wanted to know what his skin felt and smelled and tasted like.

He felt ashamed, suddenly, because Alex realized that he'd never taken time like this on anyone else, either. Sex hadn't been for exploring; it had been for getting off. He realized now what he'd been missing by rushing through everything and moving on to the next person.

Alex's skin was tingling where Dylan touched him, little shocks of electricity where Dylan's hands skimmed over Alex's chest and belly and then down his hips to his cock.

"Oh fuck, yes," Alex gasped, thrusting into Dylan's smooth fingers.

Dylan chuckled into Alex's neck and stroked him for a moment before pulling away. "Wait," he whispered, then the muscles in his back were rippling and stretching as he reached up for the lube in Alex's nightstand. When he came back, he pressed a small foil package into Alex's hand.

Thank God he'd put a new box in there the week before. Alex ripped at the square with his teeth and reached for Dylan.

"I meant on you." Dylan was stretched out against him again, lazily tugging at his own dick.

Alex stared at Dylan's hand on himself for a moment before blinking. "On me next time. Want you."

Dylan studied Alex's face and then turned to his back, his arms falling to his sides and propping one leg up. "Take."

There was a moment of being grateful for no arguments, then Alex had the condom out and was rolling it down on Dylan's thick erection with fingers that only shook a little. "Here." He passed over the lube and straddled Dylan's hips, poised just above the man's straining cock.

Dylan popped the cap and Alex closed his eyes. He couldn't help the sudden, indrawn breath when he felt slick fingers breach and stretch him.

"Warm." Dylan moaned a little.

Alex's hips moved back automatically to meet Dylan's fingers. He would have been more than happy to ride Dylan's hand and stroke off over him, but this time wasn't like the others. It wasn't about playing, it was about fucking, and Alex wanted that.

He pulled forward a little and Dylan's fingers slid out of him, then settled at Alex's hips. Alex reached down and took the base of Dylan's prick in his hand, guiding, and when he felt the blunt head nudge at his hole, they both gasped. "Yes, yes, yes," Dylan was chanting softly, his fingers grasping and pressing into the skin of Alex's waist.

Dylan had used enough lube to make everything slick and slippery and perfect. It took just a tiny bit of bearing down and then Dylan was inside Alex, buried deep. They both stopped moving and looked at each other with wide eyes. "Yes." Alex echoed Dylan's earlier sentiment.

One or both of them started to move. Alex balanced on hands and knees and sank down low, then pulled up again. Dylan's cock dragged and filled him, burning in the way that Alex loved. Everything was hot and tight, including Alex's skin, and when he angled himself to get Dylan up against his gland, there were little bursts of light behind Alex's eyes.

Alex was so focused on Dylan's dick in his ass that he'd nearly forgotten about his own cock. When Dylan wrapped a firm hand around it, Alex jerked forward and bit back a cry. "Oh *God*, yes. Dylan. Yes."

They found an uncertain rhythm together, with Alex pushing back onto Dylan's cock at the same time Dylan stroked Alex. Slow, easy thrusts that were so, so good, good enough to make Alex whimper. "Soon. Oh shit, gonna go."

"Good?" Dylan panted, his hand tightening around Alex's prick.

"Jesus, yes. Good." It was. Good enough that Alex was right at the edge after only a few minutes of it, and he prayed with all he had that Dylan was nearly there too.

The answer to that became apparent when Dylan arched his neck on the pillow and thrust up hard. "Alex!" he cried, his strokes on Alex's cock becoming tighter and faster. His thumb brushed over the tip and then Dylan was shuddering beneath him as he filled the condom.

The very faint pulses in his ass were enough to push Alex over. He grabbed handfuls of sheet on either side of Dylan and came hard, watching as warm arcs of his come landed on Dylan's fingers, chest, and shoulder.

Alex tried valiantly to stay up on shaking muscles, but Dylan pulled him down and Alex collapsed in a heap. "God. Know what?" he mumbled into Dylan's neck.

Dylan cuddled him close and nuzzled into Alex's hair. "What?"

"We're gonna do that again."

Chapter Seven

They did indeed do that again, pretty much as soon as Alex woke up.

He had buried himself under the blankets, curling in close to Dylan. His head rested near the spot between Dylan's chest and belly and he found himself nearly lulled back to sleep by the gentle rise and fall of the man's breathing. When Alex blinked sleepily and looked down, the small tattoo etched above Dylan's groin caught Alex's attention.

Alex used a gentle finger to trace the number 3 and then the 4. There was no difference in how the skin felt, but Alex imagined he could feel the edges of the numerals against the pad of his finger. "Thirty-four," he murmured, barely conscious of saying it out loud.

"Hmmm?" Dylan stretched and arched and yawned, the flex of muscles bringing his dick even closer to Alex's wandering hand.

Alex glanced up and then back down. He curled his hand around Dylan's half-hard cock and gave it a squeeze. "Thirty-four," he repeated. "Your ink. What's it mean?"

"The secret of life."

"That's forty-two." Alex chuckled and bent his head to lick at the numbers.

Dylan's breath caught. "It means keep doing that."

The answer was sort of evasive. Alex wondered about it for a second, but then Dylan's cock twitched in his hand and grew harder, so all of Alex's attention had somewhere else to focus. He darted his tongue out again to swipe over the tattoo and then lower, where the crown of Dylan's dick poked out from between Alex's thumb and forefinger.

"See?" Dylan said, with only a hint of strain in his voice. "It's working."

Alex smiled and continued making soft strokes with his tongue, tasting Dylan and feeling the man wake up even more. When he finally eased his whole mouth over Dylan's cock, Alex was rewarded with a soft groan and fingers in his hair.

"Ohhh, yeah," Dylan murmured. He stayed in the same position, partially on his side, but his hips jutted forward as Alex sucked him.

The skin of Dylan's prick was amazingly soft, while at the same time it held a core of steel. It was like touching velvet over iron and Alex marveled at the contrast. He teased for a while, licking the small, pearly drops that Dylan was leaking and wanting more of that flavor. "Good," Alex whispered before going down on Dylan again. "So good."

When Dylan was twisting and shifting on the bed, trying to get more of his cock into Alex's mouth, Alex finally gave in and shoved Dylan over onto his back. He straddled

Dylan's hips and took him in as far as he could, humming softly and trying to ignore the way his own prick dragged and caught on the sheet.

"Alex." It was a half-moan, half-whisper. Dylan's fingers were still in Alex's hair, tugging.

Come on, come on, Alex thought. He dug his nails into Dylan's hips and sucked harder, praying he would last through this and not come before Dylan was finished. Alex hummed again and made a low rumbling noise and Dylan arched his back, gasping.

"Almost. Almost, please, almost." Dylan whispered and begged and the sound of it traveled straight to Alex's dick, making him jerk.

Alex pulled off Dylan's cock long enough to lick a finger, then he lowered his head again and teased with that finger at Dylan's hole. He circled the entrance for only a minute, then pushed in while sucking hard at the head of Dylan's prick.

He had only just begun to crook his finger inside Dylan when Dylan cried out and came, cock pulsing and jumping in Alex's mouth and spurting down Alex's throat. Alex kept his finger buried inside Dylan and swallowed neatly, licking and cleaning until Dylan had stopped shaking.

When the shudders had decreased and Dylan's fingers loosened in Alex's hair, Alex rose up quickly and searched for the lube they'd discarded earlier. He found it in short order, snatched a condom from the drawer, and managed somehow to roll on the rubber while slicking up Dylan's hole.

Dylan was still open from Alex's finger, but the addition of lube seemed to relax and open him even more. Alex waited as long as he could before his self-control ran out and he positioned himself at Dylan's entrance. "Okay?" he asked, not sure what he would do if Dylan said no. Cry, maybe.

"God, yes, okay okay okay!" Dylan reached up and curled his fingers around Alex's hip, effectively tugging him forward until Alex had no choice but to sink deeply into Dylan's ass.

When he was buried in Dylan, Alex forced his eyes open and looked down. Dylan's eyes were wide and green and the pupils dilated as Alex watched, the black center expanding until there was only a thin ring of jade visible around the edge. Dylan wrapped his legs around Alex's waist and squeezed.

"You're going to move, right?"

Alex moved. He pulled out and then glided back in, over and over until he was gritting his teeth and panting through his nose. Dylan watched him with that steady green gaze,

and when one of his hands stole up to flick at Alex's nipple ring, Alex knew it was all over.

He bent forward to kiss Dylan and Dylan arched up. There was tight, hot squeezing around Alex's cock and Alex couldn't help shouting as his stomach clenched and he came.

His trembling finally eased off enough for Alex to slide out of Dylan and dispose of the condom. He returned to Dylan's side and was welcomed with soft kisses and murmurs and petting, and then Alex slept again.

"My brother died in the line of duty. He was a police officer."

Alex's fingers stilled in Dylan's hair. "I'm sorry," he replied, and it sounded so inadequate.

"His badge number was thirty-four."

The ink. Alex nodded in understanding. "I've seen tribute tats like that before. Just not... well, there."

"Yeah. I know people usually want to show them off, so they put them on their arm or shoulder or whatever. But my brother, well. Denny wasn't the kind who would want to be displayed like that. So I just put it somewhere that it wouldn't be seen. Well, by most people." Dylan winked at him.

"Your family must have been devastated." He imagined so, anyway. Alex knew his parents would be, if they'd lost a child.

"Yeah."

Dylan didn't seem inclined to say more and Alex didn't push. He resumed the gentle carding of Dylan's hair with his fingers and they were quiet for a while.

"What are you making me to eat?"

They were in the kitchen. No shirts or socks, just blue nylon track pants on Dylan and black ones for Alex. Alex appreciated the near-naked, especially when Dylan would reach up and casually brush Alex's piercing with his thumb.

"Stop," Alex grinned, not meaning it. He caught Dylan's hand and bit a finger playfully.

“Ow. Hey. Have you had a rabies shot?”

Alex widened his eyes at the jibe and sucked in a shocked breath. “This is how you repay getting well-fucked?” He bit down harder, making Dylan wrinkle his nose and swat at Alex.

“You got well-fucked, too.” Dylan laughed, trying to extract his hand from Alex’s mouth. Alex started sucking on the finger instead of biting it and Dylan seemed to change his mind. “Ohhh. I’ll take more of that.”

The beep of the microwave interrupted what Alex was hoping would be more sex on the kitchen floor. “After we eat. I need energy to keep up.”

“Sure. Abandon me for... are those peanut butter and banana sandwiches you just warmed up?” Dylan looked doubtfully at the plate.

“Try it.” Alex held up half of the sandwich for Dylan and the man took a bite.

There was silence for a moment while Dylan chewed. Then his eyes lit up and he took the other half of the sandwich from Alex. “Remind me to always warm up my sandwiches in the microwave.” He took another big bite and chewed happily.

Alex chuckled and they moved to the couch with their sandwiches and a bag of chips. Alex flipped on the TV and handed over the remote. “Here. I trust you not to watch home and garden or made for TV movies.”

“Cooking shows?”

“Yeah!”

“I was kidding.”

“Oh.” Alex blushed and covered it by taking a bite of his sandwich. “I kind of like them.”

Dylan grinned at him and started channel surfing. Alex didn’t pay much attention to the shows that were flipping by on the screen. Dylan was warm and masculine next to him on the couch and his bare chest was a little distracting.

He hadn’t realized the show that Dylan had chosen until Alex looked up from where Macavity was idly batting at one of his toy mice. He’d been distracted by the cat’s bored thoughts of *not real want real mouse not real not real*.

Alex glanced at the television and went still. Dylan had stopped at one of the numerous shows that featured animal control officers rushing into dangerous situations to save animals that were abused or neglected. They were shows that Alex avoided like the plague, even though, thank God, he couldn’t hear the animals’ thoughts.

He didn't have to be able to hear them to know what they were thinking, though. Alex had felt the vibes from abused animals before, and it had given him a migraine strong enough to make him vomit. Alex couldn't even pause when he passed those shows during channel-flipping.

Dylan was watching a uniformed officer lecture a woman with straggly hair about the emaciated dog she had chained in her yard. The patch on the officer's sleeve was from a big city in another state, but Alex knew it didn't matter where they were. There was horrible neglect and abuse happening right here in their own city. It was one of the reasons why Alex wanted so badly to be involved in the veterinary field. Any good thing he could do to counteract the bad ones would be a step forward.

He avoided looking at the TV as he got up and collected their paper plates from the coffee table. "Want anything else?" Alex asked casually as he headed to the kitchen.

"I'm good, thanks." Dylan was watching the woman on TV scream at the officer that it was her dog. The conversation was peppered with censor beeps, but the message she was sending was definitely clear.

Alex loitered in the kitchen as long as he could, wiping off counters that were already clean and checking the dishwasher once more to make sure there were no clean dishes that could be put away. Macavity hopped up to the counter and tried to distract Alex with *hungry starving food food food real food* vibes, but Alex ignored him just as hard as he was ignoring the television.

"Hey," came the inevitable call from the living room. "What happened to my half-naked arm rest?" Dylan was watching Alex putter around the kitchen with an amused expression.

"Just cleaning up." It sounded lame even to his own ears and Alex rolled his eyes at himself. He threw down the dishtowel and then heard the volume on the TV change. An obnoxious commercial replaced the sound of the animal cop show and Alex breathed a sigh of relief.

He returned to the living room and dropped down to the couch next to Dylan. The remote was under his ass and Alex pulled it out. "We can turn this off," he coaxed, pressing the 'off' button without waiting for a response.

Dylan grinned and leaned in for a kiss. "No TV? Distract me, then."

Alex did just that, glad for both the chance to draw Dylan's attention away from the television and to actually kiss the man again. Damn, but the guy was great with his mouth.

Thirty minutes later found them both panting and sticky on Alex's living room floor. Alex grinned down at Dylan and gave his half-hard cock one more squeeze. "There. Distracted enough?"

Dylan jerked and squeezed, too, his hand clutching Alex's ass. "Hey, that's sensitive." He laughed and winked. "Yeah. Totally distracted."

"Cool. Want to meet my sister?" Wait, what? Alex cursed himself and wondered when he'd become fuck-stupid. At least he hadn't asked Dylan home to meet his parents.

Dylan blinked. "Your sister."

"Um, yeah. I mean. No big deal. She's cool. It's. Heh." He finally stopped his own ridiculous babbling and waited to see if Dylan had anything to say.

"Sure." Dylan smiled easily. "I'll meet your sister. Tabitha, right?"

"Yeah. Tabby." Alex was surprised; he was pretty sure he'd only mentioned his sister's name once. "She does a Sunday dinner thing at her house a couple of times a month with her husband and a couple of their friends. Casual, low-pressure kind of thing." Alex liked Tabby's Sunday dinners, but he'd missed the last two.

"Yeah. Sounds like my kind of thing. This Sunday? I'm off."

Alex nodded. "This Sunday."

"I'll be there." Dylan nodded. "I'll assume that it's cool to bring me?"

Alex knew what he was asking. "Yeah, definitely. Tabby knows who I date, who I sleep with. She and Greg don't care." It was true, thank God. Alex had told Tabitha right out of high school that he preferred guys. She'd merely given him a funny look and said, "Oh boy, Mom's going to be mad if you don't get married."

She was right, their mother had been alternately sad and angry by turns, but ultimately had decided that having a gay son was no different than having a straight son. Grace had told Howard, the twins' father, and there had been one uncomfortable afternoon where they had all gathered in Grace's living room just to tell Alex they still loved him. Alex knew it could have been worse.

"Lucky you," Dylan replied.

Alex realized then that there was very little he knew about Dylan's family, other than the fact that he had a brother who'd died. Making a mental note to ask some more questions later, he leaned down and kissed the tip of Dylan's nose. "Lucky me," he repeated, meaning more than just his family.

Dinner at Tabitha's was what Alex had expected, including the significant looks his sister kept sending his way.

"Hello," she said with emphasis, upon meeting Dylan at the door. The first significant look was shot over Dylan's shoulder to Alex.

Alex rolled his eyes. "Dylan, this is my sister Tabitha. Tabby, Dylan."

"How *nice* to meet you. I'm older than Alex by six minutes, did he tell you?" She gave Dylan a thousand-watt smile and then shouted behind her, "Greg! We have people!"

Alex's brother-in-law appeared from the kitchen. "That's not people. That's your brother." He greeted Alex with a firm handshake and then pulled him into a quick hug. "Good to see you, man."

"Yeah, you, too. How's the shoulder?"

Greg sighed. "Still messing up my b-ball game. They want me to have that rotator cuff surgery."

"Ooh, sorry. Let my dad know if you want the number of the guy that did his." He clapped Greg on the back and turned to Dylan. "This is Greg, the lucky man who won my sister's heart." Alex ignored the smack on the arm from Tabitha.

Dylan grinned at Greg. "Hi. Nice to meet you, I've heard good things about your family."

"Don't believe everything you hear. Hey, know anything about cable boxes? The one in the bedroom keeps blinking." Greg looked puzzled and Alex suppressed a chuckle. Electronically inclined, Greg wasn't.

"Sure, let's take a look at it. Show me the way."

Greg headed down the hall with Dylan in tow. Tabitha used the moment to give Alex significant look number two. As with the first one, Alex ignored it and started toward the kitchen. "What's for dinner, Tab?"

A grizzled Labrador retriever lifted his head from a pillow in the corner and thumped his tail as they came in. "Spinach lasagna. I wanted to hide meat in the sauce but Greg said that would just be mean." Tabitha came into the kitchen behind him and opened the oven to peek at dinner. "Why does he like you?"

"Because your brother is cool. Hey, Deacon." Alex crouched down to pet the old dog and received a lick on the face and a grateful vibe of *pet pet friend Alex*. Underneath that, Alex caught a sensation of pain. "Deacon's looking old. Where's your beer?"

“Behind the mango juice. He’s limping a lot more now, I think his dysplasia’s getting worse. Tell me about Dylan.”

Twelve minutes, a new record. Alex found the beer and twisted off the top, taking a long drink before answering his sister. “There’s nothing to tell.”

“I knew you were going to say that.” Tabitha turned off the oven timer and slipped on two pink-checked oven mitts. She removed a fantastic-looking lasagna that smelled heavenly. “What does he do, where does he live, what does he drive, does he have money, are you dating or just fucking, and are his eyes really that green?”

Alex choked on his second swallow of beer, although by now he didn’t know why his sister was still surprising him. “Animal control cop, condo in the next town over, Chevy truck, none of your business, and oh my God yes.”

“If you were just fucking, you wouldn’t have brought him here.” Tabitha twinkled at him and set the lasagna on the table. She added a crisp, green salad and a loaf of garlic bread. “Dinner’s ready. Go get Greg and your boyfriend. A cop, huh? Nice.” Her grin nearly split her face.

“Not my boyfriend, and not a cop. Well, not exactly. He doesn’t carry a gun.”

“He looks like he’s packing something.” She couldn’t hide her smirk as she cut into the lasagna.

“Tabitha, for God’s sake!” Alex left the kitchen and could hear Tabby giggling behind him.

She managed to restrain herself through dinner, much to Alex’s relief, and didn’t ask Dylan any of the embarrassing questions that Alex knew she was capable of. Dessert, however, was another matter.

Tabitha brought out a beautiful chocolate-cherry trifle and displayed it in the center of the table with a flourish. “New recipe!” she announced. “I didn’t try it on Greg first. Maybe I should have.”

“Yes. If I’d keeled over dead, I would have called you and told you not to come over,” Greg said to Alex.

Alex snickered and received a whap on the back of the head from his sister. “Hey! Your husband was the one who said it!”

“You encouraged him by laughing. Go get the dessert plates for me.”

Dylan made a noise that sounded suspiciously like an amused snort, but he covered it with a cough and refused to meet Alex's eyes. Alex did catch him grinning at Tabitha, though, and sighed as he got up to get the plates. If Tabby got Dylan on her side, it was all over.

"So," Tabitha said brightly when the plates had been passed out and she'd spooned a generous amount of trifle onto each one. "Dylan. How did you and Alex meet?"

Alex tried to judge if Dylan was going to need protection against Tabitha, but the man just spooned up a bite of dessert and leaned back in his chair. "At the clinic," Dylan said, sending a wink across the table to Alex. "I brought in a deer."

"Uh-huh." She ate a bite of her own dessert and Alex could tell she'd been hoping for something more exciting. "Where was your first date?"

Greg rolled his eyes. "Tabby, you sound like your mother. Leave Alex alone."

"I'm not asking Alex, I'm asking Dylan," she pointed out. "And my mother wouldn't ask these questions anyway. That's why I do."

It was true. Aside from their teen years when Grace Myers asked all the right questions that a parent should ask -- "Where are you going, who are you going with, are their parents home," -- the twins' mother had a very "live and let live" attitude toward both of her children. Once Alex and Tabitha had turned eighteen and moved out of the house, any and all questions about their personal lives had stopped. Alex loved the privacy, but Tabitha was as nosy as ever.

"We went to breakfast," Dylan answered. "He gave me his sausage."

Tabitha choked, Greg knocked over his water glass, and Alex slammed his dessert fork down on the table and looked wide-eyed at Dylan. "Why would you say that?" Alex groaned.

"Because you did." Dylan grinned and then looked at Tabitha and winked. "He doesn't eat meat. So he gave me the sausage that came with his breakfast."

"Right, sure, of course," Tabitha sputtered as she wiped up the spilled water. "Of course."

Alex watched his sister with the beginnings of a smile tugging at his mouth. It wasn't often that she got flustered.

"Well, this conversation can be over now." Greg dabbed at the water that had trickled down from the table onto his jeans. "Or at least part of it can."

Alex cleared his throat and eyed Dylan across the table. Dylan didn't look the least bit embarrassed, just a little smug and a lot amused. Alex mock-glared at the man and Dylan's eyes lit up. "I could talk about your nipple ring instead," he grinned.

"No!" Alex rose to his feet and knocked his chair back. "Jesus Christ."

Tabitha burst out laughing again and Greg covered his face. "Stop," Greg moaned through his fingers. "I'm a liberal guy, but I don't need to know..." he paused and gestured in Alex's general vicinity, "...*that*."

Dylan looked contrite. "Sorry. Want to watch the baseball game?"

"God, yes." Greg rose from the table and disappeared into the living room, Dylan close behind.

"Well," Tabitha said, plopping back down into a chair and tossing the wet rag toward the sink. "I like your animal cop."

"I like him, too." Alex sat back down now that the danger of being embarrassed had passed. "Even though I never thought he'd say that stuff to my sister."

Tabby used one of the tines of her fork to trace the pattern of the placemat. "Does he know?"

Alex could pretend he didn't know what she meant, but that would be ridiculous. Of course he knew what she meant. "No."

"You'll tell him, though, right?"

Deacon chose that moment to lift himself from his pillow and make his way over to Alex's chair. As soon as the dog moved, Alex was hit with an immediate wave of *pain leg pain...friend friend*.

He winced and lifted his arm so that Deacon could push his head underneath and snuffle at Alex's shirt. "He hurts," Alex said to Tabitha. "That's all I'm getting from him. Well, that, and that he thinks I'm his friend." He pet Deacon's silky forehead and rubbed the dog's ears.

"You are his friend. And I know he hurts, I said he was having trouble getting around." Tabitha sighed. "I can't hear him all the time, only on bad days. Today isn't really a bad day for him."

They were born with the same empathic abilities, Alex and Tabitha had discovered when they were seven, but Alex's had always been stronger and more focused. Tabitha could 'hear' animals if she concentrated, but unless one was in some form of severe distress, the low vibes that Alex picked up were never audible to Tabby. Alex was pretty sure that

Tabitha could have developed the ability if she'd concentrated more when they were younger, but she'd never had the interest in animals that Alex did.

Deacon sighed. *Tired. Hurt. Lie down.*

Alex gave the dog one last pat. "Go on, bud. Go back to your pillow." He got up and went to the canister of dog treats on the counter and fished one out. "Go lie down, Deacon."

Deacon perked up his ears at the sound of his treat canister being opened and obeyed immediately. A steady stream of *treat treat good dog treat treat treat* came at Alex, making him laugh.

"Yes, you are." He walked to Deacon's pillow and handed him his treat. "You're a very good dog."

Tabitha watched him from her place at the table and repeated her question. "So Dylan knows, right?"

"No." Alex watched the dog crunch his Milkbone.

"That doesn't sound like you mean 'no, not yet, but I'm telling him tonight.'"

He rolled his eyes and sat back down at the table. "First of all, after I got ditched by Bobby faster than I could blink, I've made it a point not to tell people I'm dating that I can hear animals' thoughts."

"So you *are* dating him." Tabitha beamed.

"Second of all," Alex continued, ignoring her triumphant smile, "not only do I not want to tell him, I don't know how to tell him. How do you say that to someone without sounding insane?"

"True," Tabby mused. "But how do you keep something like that from an animal cop? Especially with the migraines and stuff. What if he brings in an injured animal to the clinic and you get a headache?"

It wasn't like Alex hadn't considered that. He'd been okay when Dylan had first brought in the fawn that had been hit by the car, but that was more the exception than the rule. Usually, animals in distress had vibes that went straight to the pain centers in Alex's head.

"I don't know, Tab," he finally sighed. "It hasn't really come up. Maybe it won't. I kind of like this guy, you know? I don't want to run him off."

Tabitha gave him a small smile. "I know you like him. I can tell. You've never brought anyone for Sunday dinner before." She paused for a moment, watching Deacon drowse on his pillow. "He's very nice. And wow, those eyes."

"Yeah, I know. Believe me, I know." Alex rubbed his forehead and stared at the table. "Maybe I'll tell him in a few weeks, Tab. Not yet, though."

"Okay, honey. You know I'll back your story up, if you need it."

Alex chuckled. "Then he'll think we're both crazy instead of just me. But thanks. I'll let you know."

Tabitha leaned over and kissed his cheek. "That's what older sisters are for."

Chapter Eight

He was already running late by the time he made it out to his car and saw the flat tire.

“Shit, shit, shit.” Alex swore and crouched down to examine the flat. A quick inspection turned up a nail imbedded there, so Alex dug out his emergency tools and changed over to the spare. Of course, that meant driving more slowly than usual because the spare tire wasn’t full size, and all of that added up to him being nearly forty-five minutes late. Alex was sweating and dirt-streaked by the time he finally reached the clinic.

He’d nearly forgotten about Gordon Sheer.

Gordon was sitting on the small couch in Dr. Hutchins’ office, both arms spread across the back of the sofa and one ankle resting casually on his knee. Alex cruised by the room without a second thought, glancing in as he passed. When his brain caught up with his eyes, Alex stopped and took a step backward in order to look inside the office again.

Gordon offered him a smarmy smile. “Hey, Myers. Thanks for the good word. I knew you’d do the right thing.”

Alex blinked. “They’re hiring you?”

“You sound surprised.” Gordon looked bored.

“Um. In a way. I didn’t think we needed anyone right now.” It was a lie, the clinic had been looking to hire a full-time front desk person for a few weeks now. Alex was glad; at least that meant he could give up his part-time secretarial duties and just concentrate on the animals in the back.

“Dr. Grayston said she thought I was just what this place needed. These doctors here are smarter than I thought. Of course, you probably sang my praises and that helped. You’re a good boy, aren’t you, Myers?” Gordon grinned at Alex, sinking down a little lower on the couch. “She went to get my paperwork. I start tomorrow night, three nights a week.”

That explained it. Dr. Grayston was new to the clinic and divided her time there with the wildlife center in the canyon. She was only at the clinic one or two nights a week and clearly not aware of just how much of an asshole Gordon Sheer was.

“I thought Dr. Hutchins had to hire you.” It didn’t matter now, what was done was done, but Alex still wanted to know how this travesty had occurred.

“Hutch is taking a Caribbean cruise with his family. Dr. Grayston called him to ask if she could hire, and he told her to go ahead.”

Oh. Well, there it was, clear as day. It was something that Alex honestly hadn’t thought he’d had to deal with. He stared at Gordon for nearly thirty seconds before clearing his

throat. "Okay, yeah. I'll show you how to use the front-desk computer, then." It was a small comfort that Gordon would be stuck up front in the waiting room, but at least it was something.

"Not necessary," Gordon shrugged. "I won't be working up there. She's got me training with Danielle in the back, starting tomorrow night."

"Whoa." Alex put up a hand. "In the back? You didn't get hired for the front desk job?"

Gordon snorted. "Hell, no. That shit's boring."

"So who's going to..." Alex trailed off as the end of his thought suddenly became clear. Oh, no fucking way. They couldn't be thinking about putting him on the front desk full time, could they?

Except they could, since it was the job Alex was initially hired for. It was purely a courtesy from the doctors that they let him help with the animals. When he'd started taking classes, he'd asked for some experience and they'd agreed, as long as he didn't neglect the desk.

"That would probably be you," Gordon said with a smile. "You're desk boy."

If he couldn't make himself walk away, Alex knew there was going to be a problem. His fingers were already curling into a fist and he could feel a muscle jumping in his jaw. "Congratulations. You got yourself into something you'll hate. What the fuck was the point?"

Gordon's response was cut off by the arrival of Dr. Grayston and the necessary paperwork. "Alex," she smiled. "Gordon says you two know each other."

"Oh, sure. We know each other." Alex took a step backwards.

"That'll make it easier for Gordon," she said absently, sitting down at her desk and starting to fill out the forms. "Maybe later, if you have time, you can show him what you do up front."

Gordon grinned at Alex, his eyes lighting up. "That'd be great."

He did step away then, not bothering to answer for fear of using profanity in front of Dr. Grayston. Alex knew it wasn't her fault that she'd hired Gordon, but right now Alex didn't give much of a shit about fault. He was pissed.

The eight hour shift passed in a blur. Alex stayed put firmly behind his desk. He made a show of having books spread out in front of him and didn't budge from the front except for leaving to take a piss and fetch his dinner from his locker in the back. He ate his avocado and cheese sandwich in the front, not bothering to take the half-hour break he

was entitled to. There was no way he was going to skulk around in the back and watch Gordon learn the job that Alex wanted.

Seven a.m. saw him locking the front door and leaving out the back without a word to anyone. Alex threw his backpack into the trunk of his car and screeched out of the parking lot.

He didn't even know if Dylan was home. It didn't matter. They'd exchanged keys to each other's places a few weeks ago, so Alex could at least get into Dylan's house and wait for him. It would soothe him a little, even if Dylan was working.

As much as he thought it would be okay if Dylan wasn't home, Alex felt a profound sense of relief wash over him when he saw Dylan's truck in the driveway. Alex parked haphazardly near the curb and let himself in.

The house was still dark. Early morning sunlight rarely penetrated the heavy wooden shutters that hung on the windows throughout Dylan's spacious condo. Alex listened to the silence on his way down the hall and determined that Dylan was still in bed. Perfect.

He made his way into the bedroom, which was even darker than the rest of the house. Purely by memory, Alex skirted the old trunk at the foot of the bed and came around to Dylan's side, barely able to discern the outline of the man's body under the sheet.

Alex's first instinct told him to slide in bed with Dylan. Thankfully, the memory of what had happened the first time he'd tried that kicked in quickly. Alex had made a permanent mental note to never, ever sneak up on an officer again. Instead, he kept his distance from the bed and whispered, "Hey."

"Hey," Dylan mumbled from under his pillow. "Heard you come in. Are you naked?"

His shorts and t-shirt hit the floor in record time. "I am now." Alex put a knee on the bed and crawled on top of Dylan, kicking the sheet out of the way as he went. "Hand me the lube."

"What, no 'good morning'? No 'how did you sleep'? Just come into my house, crawl into my bed, and 'hand me the lube'?"

"Is that a problem?" Alex paused, one hand on Dylan's shoulder and the other tracing along the crack of his ass.

"All my mornings should start with 'hand me the lube'." Dylan grinned sleepily over his shoulder and stretched up to the nightstand. He retrieved the tube and a condom and tossed both of them back at Alex. "There. Have at it."

Alex had a moment of regret for not being able to simply lube himself up and slide right into the tight warmth of Dylan's ass. There had been no talk of testing, though they'd

both professed to being clean. Alex figured they'd get around to it eventually if they were going to keep doing whatever it was they were doing together.

The condom rolled on easily and Alex shoved two wet fingers inside Dylan. It was a little rough and he knew it, but Dylan's arch and low sigh told Alex that he was doing fine. Alex slid his fingers deeper, probing, and then crooked them to brush up against Dylan's gland.

"*Oh*, God. Yes. More." Dylan arched again and rubbed himself on the bed.

"No." Alex withdrew his hand immediately and lined up.

"No?" Dylan looked back over his shoulder, seemingly about to protest, but Alex slid inside him before Dylan could say anything else.

They both groaned in unison. Alex didn't wait for Dylan to adjust to his presence before starting to glide in and out with short thrusts. What he really wanted to do was pound into Dylan with all the pent-up anger and frustration of the last eight hours, but on a fundamental level, Alex was conscious of the fact that Dylan was not the target of his aggression.

He kept his thrusts short and sharp until his balls were tingling and Dylan was panting beneath him. "Alex," Dylan gasped, fingers flexing and grasping at the sheet. "Fuck, yes. Hard. Hard."

Alex couldn't resist the tempting request. He slammed in deep and wedged one hand beneath Dylan's stomach to grab his cock. The other hand curled into Dylan's hair and tugged hard. "Come when I say so," Alex hissed, yanking on Dylan's hair. "With me."

"With you," Dylan whimpered, rocking his hips and shoving his prick through Alex's fingers. "When you say."

A few more strokes and Alex knew he couldn't make it last any longer. Dylan's cock was hard and leaking in his hand and the soft sounds Dylan was making into his pillow was enough to tell Alex he was ready. "One," Alex panted, feeling his sac tighten.

Dylan whimpered in response. "One."

"Two." Alex pulled out nearly all the way, leaving just the swollen head of his dick inside Dylan's hole.

"God, two," Dylan panted. His fingers scrabbled on the sheets on either side of his head.

Alex paused for as long as he could, then rammed himself back inside Dylan with a grunt. "Three," he managed. "Right now!" He squeezed Dylan's prick and thumbed over the slippery head.

Dylan clamped down hard on Alex's cock and shouted. "Fuck!"

Alex's eyes closed and he went very still, coming in quick pulses inside Dylan's ass. There was instant warmth over his fingers while Dylan jerked against him, and Alex held his breath as they both shuddered.

He lowered himself to drape across Dylan's back and lay there, panting. "Morning," Alex mumbled against Dylan's shoulder blade.

"Morning, beautiful." Dylan's voice was a rumble under Alex's ear. "Where'd all that passion come from?"

"I'm always passionate for you." Alex couldn't help smiling; it was true. Since Dylan Travers had come along, Alex had discovered a new passion for sex. Specifically, sex with Dylan.

"Well, yeah. But you put a little extra oomph in it for me."

Alex laughed as he lifted himself up and away from the warm body beneath him. He caught Dylan's slight hiss and winced. "Sorry. The extra oomph was probably a little rough."

Dylan shrugged and turned onto his back while Alex stripped and tied off the condom. "Had it rough before. I kind of like it." He grinned and looked so devilish that Alex's cock gave a renewed twitch.

He crawled back under the covers with Dylan and yawned. "My night sucked. I want to tell you about it. I'm tired."

A warm arm snaked over Alex's stomach. "Sleep first. Then I'll feed you. Then you can tell me of night suckage."

"I like when my decisions are made for me." Alex yawned again, this time wide enough for his eyes to water.

"Just sleep."

He did.

When Alex woke up, there was more light in the bedroom than there'd been that morning and he could smell breakfast. Well, considering a check of his watch said it was nearly two p.m., he was probably smelling lunch.

He pulled on a pair of Dylan's clean sweatpants that had been tossed over a chair and wandered out to the kitchen. "Hey," he yawned, blinking against the sunlight.

"You have great timing." Dylan slid a plate onto the table. A stuffed flour tortilla and a side of potatoes nearly overflowed it. "Egg, beans, salsa, potato. No meat."

Alex's stomach rumbled in response and he sat down at the table. "I think I'll keep you." He picked up the wrapped tortilla and took a bite, making appreciative sounds when he tasted the homemade salsa inside.

Dylan sat across from him with his own plate. "That was kind of the idea."

He stopped chewing for a minute and looked up. Dylan was watching him with a half-smile and warm eyes. "To stick around by making me breakfast?"

"To stick around for anything."

Alex swallowed his bite and took a long drink from the water bottle Dylan had given him. He knew his cheeks were flushing; he could feel the heat rising along the back of his neck. Alex was unsure of the appropriate response to what he was pretty sure was an offer to make things permanent, or at least exclusive, for now. Not that he was seeing anyone else, and he knew Dylan wasn't either. But it was nice to hear the words.

Alex looked up again and Dylan's expression had changed from warm to amused. He took a bite of his own tortilla. "So, last night sucked. Tell me why."

The memory of it came rushing back and Alex's food lost some of its appeal. He put down his fork and sighed. "God. It started off shitty and then just got worse." Alex rested his forehead against the heel of his hand and studied his plate. "So, I had a flat tire."

By the time Alex had finished relaying the whole evening's events, Dylan had scooted his chair around the table to sit next to him. He took Alex's hand and held it tightly in one of his own, Dylan's fingers wrapped warm and solid around Alex's. "You're right. Your night sucked."

"I told you." Alex looked at their hands together and felt marginally better.

"No wonder you came in this morning all wound up. And here I thought it was because you missed me last night."

Alex glanced up and smiled a little. "That, too."

"Good to know." Dylan smiled back and then shook his head. "I don't like that guy."

"Me either." Alex slumped back in his chair, keeping his fingers tangled with Dylan's.

“No, I mean... I really don’t like that guy.” Dylan’s voice had a hard edge to it that Alex hadn’t heard before. “There’s got to be something you can do.”

“I could quit,” Alex sighed. “Come and live with you and you could pay all my school bills and rent. Hey, that actually sounds like a really good idea. Got room?” He finished with a small laugh and rolled his eyes.

“Yes.”

“I was kidding. I’m not going to quit.” Despite the bad news he’d gotten last night, Alex still liked working at the clinic. He was sorry that he wouldn’t be able to use his connection with animals as much, but he didn’t figure that little talent was going away anytime soon. It would help with vet school, in any case.

“I know you were kidding. I wasn’t. There’s room here; move in.” Dylan’s expression was serious and his hand was warm around Alex’s.

“I. Um. Nah. Really?” Alex couldn’t find a way to put a sentence together. It was the last thing he’d expected.

Dylan looked at him. “You’re right, forget it.”

“What?”

“I’m kidding.” Dylan chuckled and squeezed Alex’s hand. “God, you really are uptight from last night. Come here.” He got up from the table and tugged at Alex’s hand.

Alex went with him, still unsure of the invitation Dylan had issued and whether or not to take it seriously. But Dylan was pulling him to the couch and then urging Alex down, and when Dylan sank to the carpet between Alex’s legs, there wasn’t room for Alex to think about anything other than Dylan’s mouth nuzzling at his crotch.

“Just don’t think for a few minutes,” Dylan murmured, pulling down Alex’s waistband and drawing out his half-hard cock. “I’ll ask you again when I’m done here.”

There was nothing to do but comply, especially as Dylan’s mouth was already closing around the head of Alex’s prick and sucking lightly. Alex made a strangled sound and let his head fall against the back of the couch. “Yes,” he whispered, suddenly wanting -- no, it felt more like needing -- this a lot at that very moment.

Dylan pulled off and used a warm hand to stroke Alex for a moment, thumb sweeping over the head and then reaching down between Alex’s legs to cup and fondle his balls.

Alex nodded a lot and kicked his sweats away. “Yes,” he said again with a gasp. “Yes, yes, yes, that.” With the fabric gone from around his legs, Alex leaned back on the couch and spread for Dylan.

“Well, well. Look who knows how to be slutty.” Dylan looked up at him with twinkling eyes before lowering his head once more to Alex’s stiff prick.

Alex fought with himself over closing his eyes to enjoy the blowjob or keeping them open to watch. Keeping them open won, mostly because Dylan was damn hot when he was sucking Alex off. He stared, mesmerized, as Dylan played with him.

Dylan was fucking fantastic at giving head and threw himself into it every time. Alex knew that not only was the man good at it, but he loved doing it. Alex watched as Dylan’s eyes closed and he took Alex almost all the way in. There was drag and suction against his cock and Alex groaned, trying not to lose all decorum and start fucking Dylan’s mouth without an invitation.

Then suddenly there were two hands sliding under Alex’s ass and cupping his cheeks. Dylan didn’t break rhythm, but pulled Alex toward him, encouraging him to move. Alex jerked his hips forward almost immediately and plunged into Dylan’s mouth. He hit the back of Dylan’s throat and moaned at the slick tongue that was curling around his cock.

In and then out, Alex fucked Dylan’s mouth and relished the feel of Dylan’s fingers digging into the soft skin of his ass. Alex didn’t bother holding back; he knew Dylan wanted him to let go, and right now Alex wanted it, too. Dylan was right and good and everything that was the opposite of the shitty night Alex had had.

The need to come was burning in the pit of his belly. Alex clenched and thrust and grasped the couch in desperate fingers as Dylan sucked him. His eyes fluttered closed despite his best attempts to keep them open, but when Dylan’s tongue pushed into Alex’s slit and then dragged down his shaft again, it didn’t matter. Alex bucked up hard and came, his orgasm washing over him in long, shuddering waves.

He took so long to catch his breath and open his eyes that he nearly missed Dylan yanking open his jeans and jacking off with quick, hard thrusts. He had one hand braced on the couch, and while Alex watched through a come-stupid daze, Dylan stroked himself to a fast climax.

“Oh, pretty.” Alex sat limply on the sofa and watched Dylan kneeling on the floor, hand moving fast on his dick. “Do it. Show me.”

Dylan nodded and squeezed his eyes shut. Two more strokes and he threw his head back, shooting over his hand and onto the floor with a grunt. “God,” he panted, eyes still closed. “You’re really hot when you get head, you know that?”

Alex laughed and slithered onto the floor next to Dylan, pulling him down and cuddling him. “Not as hot as you jerking off after you suck me.”

They lay together for a while, kissing and cuddling, until Dylan finally rolled over and sat up. “So, I don’t think I’ve ever had come stains on my carpet before.”

Alex lifted his head and looked at the white streaks. “Baking soda. Vinegar. Something like that.”

Dylan leaned over with a smile and kissed him again. “I’ll Google it. Are you moving in?”

He’d nearly forgotten. Alex blinked and dropped his head back down to the rug. He stared up at Dylan’s ceiling. “You have vaulted ceilings in here. I like them.”

“Uh-huh. Are you moving in?”

“I have animals. Macavity, Violet. Karma.” Alex thought there had to be some rule somewhere about an animal control officer living with an illegal pet.

“Right. Are you moving in?” Dylan’s expression hadn’t changed; he looked at Alex almost curiously.

“I... yes.”

Chapter Nine

The actual moving in part wasn't bad. Alex didn't have a whole lot of possessions, and most of what he had wasn't as nice as Dylan's anyway. Most of the furniture went to Goodwill and he didn't have enough clothes to fill up all of the closet space Dylan had made for him.

"You need to go shopping for clothes," Dylan mused, as he watched Alex stuff more T-shirts into drawers. "We. We need to go shopping for clothes. Because I'm not letting you buy any more T-shirts."

"I like T-shirts." Alex looked at the ones in his hand. What was wrong with T-shirts?

"So do I. But I own other articles of clothing. Also, where are the rest of your pants? You've got to have more than jeans." Dylan swept aside the four pairs Alex had already hung in the closet.

Alex laughed. "Actually, I don't. I'm just a starving student, remember? You're the one who's all grown up with a real job. I just go to school and work as a glorified secretary." The reminder of what his job at the clinic had been reduced to was enough to dampen his good mood, and Alex dropped his pile of T-shirts on the floor before sitting down next to them.

"Aw, honey." Dylan was next to him immediately, shoving aside the clothes that hadn't yet been stored. "It's temporary. And besides, you have youth on your side. I'm older, remember?"

"Five years older is not that big a deal." Alex leaned into him and picked up a faint whiff of aftershave. It was nice.

"I'm thirty," Dylan sighed.

"You're thirty-two." Alex nuzzled the spot where the scent of aftershave was strongest, right there on Dylan's neck.

Dylan tilted his head to allow Alex more room. "Okay, even worse. I'm not just thirty, I'm *in* my thirties. That's too old for you. We should break up."

"Okay, sure. After we mess around a little. God, are you wearing new cologne or something? It smells amazing." Alex got up on his knees and pushed Dylan backward on top of his discarded T-shirts. He climbed on top of Dylan and straddled his hips as he nuzzled and licked at his neck.

"Some stuff I got for Christmas last year. Do you like-- *oh*, God, I guess you do." Dylan closed his eyes and let Alex grind down on him while sucking up a warm, wet mark on his neck.

Alex moved slowly, liking the feel of two pairs of jeans between them when they were both hard. It added some nice friction when he dragged his cock over Dylan's crotch, back and down and then up again, rubbing leisurely, but with definite purpose.

"Can we get these pants off, please?" Dylan arched his neck on the floor and tried to wiggle a hand in between them to get at his fly.

"That was a very polite request." Alex leaned down and kissed the tip of Dylan's nose. "But no. Not 'til after."

Dylan groaned and removed his hand. He put both hands on Alex's waist and tried guiding his hips instead. "After what?"

"After I make you come in them. Then I'll let you take them off." Alex lowered his head again and returned to the small love mark he'd started making on Dylan's neck.

There was no protest from Dylan. The only sound he made was a soft sigh as he settled Alex more firmly on his hips and then tilted his head to allow Alex access to more skin, so Alex took advantage of Dylan's complacency and began sucking in earnest.

Alex ground down hard, bringing their denim-covered erections into contact as he licked and sucked and tongued over the wet skin. The urgency that he always felt when he was near Dylan flared up, sudden and sharp, and his cock throbbed in his jeans. "Hot," Alex whispered. "God, you are so--" he paused, drawing a quick breath, "--hot."

Dylan only whimpered and rocked his hips up, seeking more pressure. "Alex."

"Yes." Alex bit and licked at Dylan's neck and scraped his teeth back and forth over the same tender spot as he ground down hard with his cock. He knew they must look like teenagers, grinding and humping on the floor while they made out, but Alex didn't care. It felt good and his blood was singing and Dylan was pliant and willing underneath him.

"Oh, fuck!" Dylan gasped. He hooked his ankle over Alex's calf and froze, fingers digging into Alex's waist. Between them, Alex could feel a very faint pulsing and then a slow, spreading warmth.

He grinned and bit down again on Dylan's neck. One more gentle rock forward and Alex was coming, too, toes curling in his tennis shoes and his body shuddering.

They both started laughing at the same time. Alex had his head buried in Dylan's neck and Dylan's hand was resting comfortably at the small of Alex's back. "We christened your floor," Alex chuckled.

"In this room. There are other rooms." Dylan sounded lazy and content.

“Cool.” Alex lifted his head and looked down at the mark he’d made. It was bigger than he’d thought, and was turning a nice shade of reddish-purple. “Huh,” he said, studying it. Somehow he didn’t think a giant hickey would go over well at Dylan’s place of employment.

“That better be below my collar. I need to see a mirror.” Dylan arched a brow but made no move to get up.

“I think it is. It looks like it. Maybe.” Alex drew a bit of his bottom lip into his mouth and worried it.

Dylan looked up at him, eyes twinkling. “You’re really cute when you’re concerned. I don’t care. They’ve all been bugging me to get laid anyway. They’ll be thrilled if they think I’m getting some on a regular basis.”

“You are.”

“I know. Lucky me.” He grinned widely, making Alex laugh.

He started to respond but was nearly knocked over with a sudden, silent cry of *hungry!* Damn, he’d nearly forgotten about the animals that Dylan had graciously accepted as roommates along with Alex.

Alex whipped his head up and listened carefully, trying to determine if the thought had come from cat, ferret, or snake. He didn’t realize he had an obvious look of concentration on his face until Dylan cleared his throat.

“Hey. You okay?”

Alex nodded without looking back down at him. “Someone’s hungry and I don’t know who.”

“Uhhh... me? It’s past lunch.”

“No, someone with four legs. Or no legs, as the case may be.” He scrambled up and made a face at his sticky jeans.

“Okay.” Dylan sounded amused. He got up too and headed in the direction of the bathroom. “If you say so.”

It would have been a good opportunity to try and explain exactly what his questionable talent was, but Alex let the moment pass in favor of finding out which one of his pets had a belly that was empty enough to cry about. After all, he and Dylan were living together now, so there would probably be plenty of time to bring up the subject. He’d think about it later.

Macavity was asleep in one of the clothes boxes Alex had emptied and Violet was contentedly stretched out over her heat rock. A little more poking around turned up Karma in her hammock at the top of her cage. She'd turned over her food dish, of course, and was staring woefully at the remnants scattered over the floor. *Hungry*, she wailed again as soon as she saw Alex. *Food. Food. Eat. Play? Eat. No cage. No cage.*

Alex sighed and toed at the little brown nuggets of food all over the floor of Dylan's spare bedroom. "Yes, cage," he murmured to her. "At least until I know you'll behave in here and not tear up the carpet or scratch at the door. Dylan hasn't ever had to ferret-proof his house before."

Karma just stared at him with her bright black eyes and twitched her whiskers. *No cage*, she repeated. *Food.*

"Food I can do." He reached in and righted her food dish, reminding himself to either buy a heavier one or use something to secure it to the side of the cage.

She wiggled out of her hammock immediately and nosed her way around Alex's hand, trying in vain to climb up the sleeve of his shirt. *Play. Play.*

He couldn't help chuckling at her. "Fine," he relented. "We'll play for a while." He set her down on the floor and made sure the bedroom door was shut. "Even though I still have gross jeans. You better appreciate this."

Karma danced away from him as soon as her feet touched the ground. She writhed around in happiness at her freedom and made the soft noises of joy that ferrets always made when allowed to run free. Within moments, she had disappeared under the tall armoire in the corner.

Alex snorted and crouched down to scoop up the pieces of food she had knocked out of her cage, fully expecting to be ambushed by Karma shooting out from under the armoire to attack his feet. He hoped Dylan had a good vacuum, or at least a Dustbuster.

The sound of the door clicking open behind him made Alex pause in picking little scraps of food out of the carpet. He looked over to see Dylan poking his head in. "Hey," Dylan said, looking curiously at Alex kneeling on the floor. "What happened? Did she-- oh, shit."

The open door had attracted Karma instantly, of course, and while Dylan was looking at Alex, the little ferret had eased through the crack in the door and out into the house. Alex could hear her as she hopped gleefully into the hallway. *Play play new space no cage no cage play!*

"Damn it, I'm sorry." Alex dumped the handful of food back into Karma's dish and squeezed past Dylan in the doorway. "She's feeling a little cooped up, and-- Karma, no!"

She'd already wriggled her way onto the bottom shelf of the large entertainment center that took up most of the living room wall. Dylan had placed several box sets of DVDs there, some of which were still encased in store plastic, and Karma had discovered that the plastic made crinkly noises when pierced by sharp teeth. She was trying to get her mouth far enough around one of the boxes in order to drag it off.

"Brat," Alex said, approaching her slowly, hoping that the DVD box would distract her long enough for him to seize her.

No such luck, of course, because as soon as he got close enough she was off again, abandoning the box with a nice set of new teeth marks in it.

Her next venture was to the little shelf beneath the coffee table. The wooden drink coasters there caught her attention, and since they were considerably smaller than the DVD box, Karma seized one and began backing across the floor, pulling it in her teeth.

Alex would have laughed out loud at her fierce *mine mine mine* as she yanked on the coaster, but he was too annoyed at her escape. "Not yours," he told her crossly, and scooped her up, coaster and all.

She dropped the wooden square to the carpet and squirmed in Alex's grip. *Play! Let go let go let go play.*

A twinge of guilt went through him. It wasn't her fault she'd been cooped up in her cage for two days. She was used to an entire room to play in and only used her cage for eating and bathroom purposes. Most of the time she didn't even sleep in there, preferring one of the dark tubes that were now in a storage box in the corner.

"Okay," he tried to soothe. "We'll play, I promise." Alex held her firmly by the scruff of the neck so she would stop wiggling. "I'll set something up for you."

Dylan followed him back to the guest bedroom. "We'll get her tubes and ramps and stuff up tonight."

"I'm sorry," Alex sighed. He dropped Karma back into her cage and latched the door, much to her dismay. *No*, she vibed sadly. *No cage. No cage. Outside play play. Food!* She was distracted from her woes by the handful of food Alex had put back into her dish and dove in right away, so Alex turned to Dylan and repeated himself. "Sorry about that."

"Why?" Dylan smiled. "Not your fault. Or hers, either. She's used to more space."

Alex nodded and followed Dylan back out to the living room. He picked up the abandoned coaster and examined it. No teeth marks, which was good. The DVD box didn't fare so well, however, and Alex winced as he studied it. "Um. Sorry about this. Can I get you a new one?" It was an unopened box set of the first season of that show

where the entire season took place over the course of one full day. Alex had never watched it, but Dylan obviously liked it.

“No,” Dylan laughed. “Someone at work gave it to me for a present. I’ve never seen it and it doesn’t matter. If I want to watch it, the discs inside are fine.”

He ran a finger over the corner of the box that Karma had managed to pierce with her sharp teeth. “Yeah, well. I still feel bad. Can I make it up to you with dinner or something?”

“Or something.” Dylan sidled up close to him and grinned. “Sure. You’re very cute. Seriously, can you not worry about it? It’s not like I don’t know animals are unpredictable.” He kissed Alex’s nose and slid strong arms around Alex’s waist.

Alex blushed and tried not to care that his cheeks were pink. It was just a normal reaction to most sweet things Dylan said, just like the way that his cock leapt to attention was normal, too. Might as well go with it. “Fine, fine. I won’t worry about it. As long as we get her set up in there so she won’t be so inclined to sneak out whenever the door opens, and also as long as you let me take you to dinner or something.”

“I already told you. ‘Or something’ is what I want. Can I pick the something?” Another kiss landed on Alex’s nose, followed by a nuzzle.

Now his cock was being as demanding as Karma. “Yes. Sure. When? Now? Okay.” Alex had nearly forgotten that they’d come out to the living room to retrieve the box of Karma’s toys and tunnels.

The answer did indeed turn out to be “now”, and the “something” turned out to be a nice, hard fuck over the arm of the couch.

They couldn’t find the lube, or it was too far away or something. An unlubed condom in Dylan’s wallet was all they took the trouble to find. Dylan didn’t seem to care when Alex dropped to his knees behind Dylan and licked at his ass. “Like this, okay?” Alex whispered against Dylan’s smooth ass cheek. “Let me.”

A moan and an arched back was the perfect response, so Alex went with it and pushed his tongue inside. He licked and tasted and made everything wet and shiny, using a finger at the same time to stretch Dylan’s hole and prep as best he could.

Oh, this deserved more than a quick lick and taste, but there would be time later for more detailed rimming. Right now it served the purpose of slicking Dylan up enough for Alex’s cock, so Alex rose from his knees and draped himself over Dylan’s back. The condom made it on his dick by the grace of God and Alex reminded himself one more time to get them both tested together.

He used one hand to guide and the other to steady himself. "Okay?" Alex panted, hoping that there wouldn't be too much sting.

"Yes, yes!" Dylan arched and pushed again and Alex had no choice but to ease his way inside the warmth that was already bearing down on him.

It was tight and hot without lube and oh God, so good. Alex knew it was probably burning Dylan at least a little, but there was no protest and so he kept going. All the way in, balls deep, and then all of a sudden there was nothing else to do but come.

Alex stood there shaking, his whole body centered around the shocks of pleasure in his prick, and wanted to be embarrassed, but it felt too good. Not to mention the fact that there was already warm stickiness over the fingers he'd managed to get around Dylan's cock, so Alex wasn't alone in his quick-draw timing.

"Consider my DVDs replaced," Dylan mumbled.

Ten p.m. saw them with most of Alex's boxes unpacked and clothes put away. They'd managed to set up enough tunnels and pipes for Karma to make her deliriously happy in her new home, and Alex made a point of telling Dylan that she'd probably ruin some of the carpet in there but he'd replace it as soon as he could. That remark got waved off, of course, but Alex knew he'd be doing it anyway.

There was pizza for dinner-- thank God for pizza places that delivered until midnight -- and Alex didn't anticipate the next animal problem until they fell into bed at eleven.

Dylan was asleep almost right away and Alex was close behind, his body worn out from lifting boxes and the sex that had happened in between. Dylan was warm and solid behind him and Alex snuggled back, yawning.

Want in. In in in in in in. Want in. In!

Alex's eyes flew open in the dark and he held his breath. He waited for almost a full minute for Dylan to wake up from the noise before realizing that of course Alex was the only one hearing Macavity complain outside the closed bedroom door.

"No," he whispered as loudly as he dared.

The cat, of course, either didn't hear him or paid no attention. *Inside*, he insisted with growing frustration. *Inside with people. Bed. Bed. People. Inside.*

Although his body protested leaving both the warm bed and the cradle of Dylan's arms, Alex gritted his teeth and eased himself out from under the blankets. He padded naked to

the door and cracked it open, sliding out to the hallway before Macavity could slip inside the bedroom.

“Sorry, bud.” Alex slid down the wall and sat on the hallway floor. Macavity butted against his leg and purred. *Person. Mine. Inside? Bed. Mine.*

Alex rolled his eyes at the cat’s internal dialogue and wondered why all his animals felt so entitled to things. “Yes, yes. I’m yours. But the bedroom isn’t, yet. Or the bed. I put your own bed out there on the couch, can’t you just use it for tonight? You’re nocturnal anyway, why do you want to sleep?”

He knew the cat wasn’t understanding him, but it was habit to talk to all animals like they did. Macavity sat down and blinked huge golden eyes, clearly waiting for Alex to get up and let him into the bedroom.

“No,” Alex said again, and yawned. Christ, he was tired. “I gave you a new catnip mouse. Go play with it.”

Macavity’s ears twitched at the word “mouse” and when Alex rose to his feet, the cat turned and wandered off the other direction.

“Praise Jesus,” Alex mumbled, letting himself back into the bedroom. He’d talk to Dylan about letting Macavity in there tomorrow. It was just that everything was so clean and non-pet-hair-covered that Alex was tentative about letting the cat shed everywhere.

He’d just lain down and closed his eyes again when the mantra started up for the second time.

In in in in in. In. Bedroom sleep sleep bed person. In in.

Alex kept his eyes firmly closed. This was going to be a long night.

Chapter Ten

They all settled in fairly well; much better than Alex had anticipated, at any rate. He hadn't been worried about Violet, but Macavity and Karma were a different story. They'd done well, though. Karma had only made one other escape from the spare bedroom and Macavity had been on his best behavior with both litter box and scratching post manners.

Mostly, Alex was amazed at how quickly he himself had adjusted to living with Dylan. He'd spent the night at guys' places before, sometimes even for two nights in a row, but usually by the second night he was antsy and fidgety and anxious to get home. Alex just always figured he was meant to live alone, with only animals for company.

But then again, none of those guys had carried an injured fawn into Alex's clinic. There was probably some connection there.

Alex slid into his chair behind the desk at work and smiled to himself as he remembered the first time Dylan had walked into the clinic. D. Travers, the nametag had said, and eyes green like grass had caught Alex's attention immediately.

Even thinking about it now made Alex's cock stiffen in his jeans. It was an uncomfortable reminder that he didn't bother wearing scrubs to work anymore. He rarely went into the exam rooms and got to handle the animals even more rarely than that, so Alex realized it was stupid to wear scrubs to work and pretend nothing had changed. He started wearing jeans and a polo shirt with the clinic name embroidered on it and felt more like a secretary than ever.

Barely realizing what he was doing, Alex dropped a hand into his lap and tried unsuccessfully to adjust himself through the denim. All he managed to do was give his cock a rub by accident. That did nothing for getting his erection to go down, and Alex wondered if he'd be lucky enough to have Dylan stop by during his shift.

He was entertaining vague thoughts of jerking off quickly in the bathroom when Alex heard a voice that made his dick want to shrivel up.

"Myers. Dr. Grayston said for you to show me how to set up the IV injections." Gordon sounded bored, as usual.

"That's a tech's job." Alex eyed him suspiciously.

"The fuck do I care? She said she wants me to learn how to set up for surgeries and you could show me."

Alex didn't move from behind the desk. "Where's Danielle?"

Gordon shrugged. "Dunno. Her husband called and said her kid was sick. She left."

That explained it. Danielle was newly divorced and her ex-husband had a habit of calling her every time there was the smallest issue with their young son. She must have gone home. It was after midnight, so Alex knew from experience that the clinic could run without a tech until dawn unless it got freakishly busy.

“Whatever,” he finally mumbled, and pushed back from the desk. The notes he was taking on *Amphibian Medicine and Captive Husbandry* were less than thrilling. “Come on.” Alex headed toward the back, Gordon in tow.

Alex poked his head into one of the two operating rooms and found it empty. He flipped on the light and pointed to a drawer. “Get out the syringes and tourniquets and wipes.”

Gordon did as Alex told him while Alex turned to get the saline from the cabinet. Alex turned back to the steel table in time to see Gordon dump the requested material in a heap. “There,” Gordon said. “Show me.”

“No problem. Give me your arm.” Alex reached out a hand.

Gordon backed up immediately. “Fuck that.”

“Okay.” Alex dropped the rubber tubing on the table. “I’ll be up front.” The last thing he wanted to do was argue with the asshole.

“Show me on yourself.” Gordon narrowed his eyes at Alex and stayed where he was.

Alex laughed. “Sure, I don’t care. I didn’t know you had a needle phobia.” He picked up the tubing and took one end in his teeth, ready to tighten it around his upper arm.

“Fuck you. I don’t have a phobia.” Gordon approached the table, scowling.

“Oh. Yeah, okay. Whatever you say.” Alex didn’t give a shit either way.

Gordon grabbed the tubing from Alex and held it out. “I said I don’t have a fucking phobia. Show me how to prep the goddamn thing.”

The insistence Gordon was showing made Alex quirk a brow at him, but Gordon was staring stubbornly at the needle and the vial of saline. Alex shrugged it off and tightened the tubing around the man’s arm.

Alex snapped on a pair of gloves before giving Gordon a quick lesson on prepping and inserting IVs. Alex was surprised when Gordon seemed to take it seriously, watching carefully as Alex used the needle to insert the IV port and then inject a small bit of saline.

“I barely feel that.” Gordon was examining the IV port in his hand as Alex injected him.

“That’s because I’m doing it right. But I still don’t know why I’m showing you how to do this. The techs take care of surgery prep.” Alex withdrew the needle and tossed it into a sharps container. He used gloved fingers to take out the port from the back of Gordon’s hand and then reached up to untie the tubing.

“Ow, watch it,” Gordon complained when Alex deliberately let the tubing snap against his arm while he untied it. “Now let me practice on you.”

Alex laughed. “Hell, no. This isn’t part of your job, so go home and practice on a chicken breast. All you need to know how to do is set up a suture tray for surgeries and the techs will do the rest.”

Gordon sneered at him. “You’re such a little prick. I should go home and call my mom and let her know just exactly how unwilling you were to help me.”

“Fuck off,” Alex said tiredly. He stripped his gloves and dropped them into a waste bin. He’d been hearing Gordon’s threats for a month now and Alex was pretty sure it was just a lot of hot air, but part of him was afraid to run the risk of it being true. “I did what you asked. Anything else you want, Dr. Grayston will have to ask me herself. I don’t take orders from you.”

Gordon mumbled something else under his breath that Alex was sure was less than flattering, but Alex was tired and unwilling to keep arguing. He left Gordon in the vacant operating room and returned to the front desk. He sat down with a sigh and, on a whim, pulled his cell phone out of his pocket.

Dylan answered on the second ring. “Hey, you. Fraternizing on company time?” His voice was warm over the line and Alex felt better immediately.

“Me? What about you, answering your cell on shift? I was just going to leave a voice mail.”

“I get this thing called a break. Right now I’m sitting in the front seat of the truck with a really good looking orange-cranberry muffin. Oh, and a hot little number called a ‘carton of milk’. So what are you wearing?” Dylan took a bite of his muffin; Alex could hear him chewing.

“Jeans. And a sweater I haven’t seen before, so I think that means it’s yours. Our laundry gets mixed up together.” Alex kind of liked that. He had caught Dylan wearing one of his t-shirts the other day and his stomach had made a weird fluttering feeling.

There was the audible sound of chewing and swallowing. “Nice. Breathe a little heavy for me and we’ll call it a night.” Dylan chuckled and Alex could hear him drinking his milk.

“I’ll save it for the morning.” Alex propped up his head with a hand and doodled in the margin of his notebook. He was hit with a wave of missing Dylan, which was a little

ridiculous since they'd seen each other eight hours ago and would be seeing each other again in another eight.

Something in Alex's voice must have given away his mood, because Dylan's tone changed immediately. "Hey. You all right, honey? What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Alex sighed. "Except I think I want to quit my job." He blinked even as the words came out of his mouth; Alex hadn't realized the truth of them until he said them.

The sound of the truck starting was audible as Dylan spoke. "But you love that job. You love the clinic. And the shelter, what about the shelter?"

"I know, I know, I know." Alex rubbed his forehead and frowned at his textbook. "I do love it. And I've been working here for four years, it's not like I'm not invested. It's just that... I don't know." He sighed again and wasn't sure how to put the feeling into words. There had to be somewhere else he could go where he wasn't taunted by Gordon Sheer's smug face or trapped behind the front desk for nearly ten hours.

"I think you need to think about it some more. We'll talk it over. You can tell me all your reasons when we're at home, because doing it over the phone while we're each at work isn't the time." Dylan sounded calm and reasonable, his usual demeanor, and Alex felt marginally better.

"Yeah, I know. Okay. Maybe tomorrow over breakfast." There was a sweep of headlights in the parking lot, but Alex didn't look up. "Someone just pulled in; I gotta go. Be nice to the stray dogs for me."

"Sure, honey." Dylan hung up and Alex snapped his phone closed, resisting the urge to sigh for the third time. It wasn't like him to be so morose.

When the front doors swung open, Alex looked up to see if whoever was coming in for help needed assistance with their animal. His gaze fell upon Dylan, who greeted him with a wink. "Milk?" Dylan asked, holding out the carton.

Alex got up and rounded the desk. He crossed the floor to Dylan and hugged him hard, inordinately pleased to see him. "You were close by," he accused. "I didn't warrant a visit?"

"I was going to, right after I finished eating," Dylan laughed, holding Alex close and nuzzling into his hair. "I was at that all-night mini-mart around the corner."

He held Dylan tightly for another moment before letting go and stepping back. Alex couldn't help casting one appreciative look over the man's uniform. "I should demand visits every time you're on shift. Turn around so I can see your ass."

Dylan grinned and did as he was asked, turning in a slow circle with his arms out. "Look all you want. But there are laws against molesting officers."

Alex's cock leaped. "What about the ones on break?"

"There might be a loophole," Dylan twinkled. "As long as you're on break, too."

He turned immediately and opened the door to the back. "Danielle!" Alex called. "I'm taking my lunch."

There was no answer and Alex remembered that Gordon had said that Danielle had gone home. That meant Gordon would be the only one in the clinic besides the doctor, who usually holed up in his office and didn't pay much attention to anything besides the patients.

Alex wasn't sure it was that great of an idea to leave Gordon alone while Alex went out front to mess around with Dylan, but Dylan in his uniform wasn't the easiest thing to resist.

"Let's go," Alex said, snagging Dylan's belt in eager fingers and pulling him to the front door. "I want to see how many laws I can break in thirty minutes."

Dylan just grinned and pointed toward the white truck that was parked at the curb.

There was no back seat, but Alex was just grateful for the bench seat in the front. It would have been really damn hard to get sucked off with bucket seats, although Alex was pretty sure they could have found a way.

Alex scrambled in on the driver's side. He scooted across the seat and leaned his back against the far door, reaching for Dylan. "Gimme."

"Wow. Remind me again why I don't stop by more often?" Dylan eased behind the wheel and started the truck.

"I don't know. You should. Where are we going?" Alex palmed himself over his jeans and tried to keep his erection down so vital circulation wouldn't be cut off.

Dylan pulled the truck into the farthest parking space from the door. "Out of the way. If you're going to make me break laws, best not to do it right there on the street, right?"

"Sure. Right. Okay." Alex barely listened to what the man was saying. As soon as Dylan killed the truck's engine, Alex reached over and dragged him across the seat.

"Man." Dylan laughed and let Alex shove him to the floor on the passenger side, right between Alex's legs. "You're in one of those pushy moods. I like it."

It seemed to Alex that he was in a pushy mood a lot these days, and most of the time the mood resulted from being at work. Or possibly just from being near Gordon. They were pretty much one and the same, anyway. Alex didn't want to think about it.

Instead, he looked down at Dylan. He was kneeling in the cramped space and smiling up at Alex, eyes shining. "Well? Gonna show me the goods, or what?"

Alex paused for a moment, one hand on his fly. He reached out with the other hand and cupped Dylan's chin, sliding a thumb back and forth over Dylan's smooth jaw, though Alex knew it would be covered with light stubble by morning. "I'm lucky," he said softly.

Dylan blinked. "Shoot, baby. I'm the lucky one. I get to suck you off." He winked and leaned into Alex's touch.

Alex's cock gave that same familiar leap it always did when Dylan said things like that, but he ignored it for the moment and shook his head. "No," he insisted stubbornly. "I mean I'm lucky. Lucky to have you here right now. Lucky to have you at all. Okay?" It was important Dylan know what he meant.

"Okay," Dylan soothed, looking up at him. "If it makes you feel better to say it, then say it as much as you want."

"I'm lucky." Alex repeated himself as he watched Dylan pop the button on his jeans and draw out Alex's cock.

"We both are." Dylan lowered his head and took Alex all the way into his mouth with one smooth swallow. He had pulled up and off again before Alex had time to do more than gasp and jerk his hips forward.

His dick protested the absence of tongue and mouth. "Hey." Alex's hands were already shaking and he drummed the heel of one foot against the floor of the truck. "That was a good start."

Dylan smiled against Alex's prick and then Alex could feel a sweep of tongue over the crown and down the side of his shaft. "It'll be a better finish," Dylan told him, in between licks. "Just trust me."

Famous last words. Alex tried to keep his jiggling leg still and let his head fall back against the seat. "I trust you."

There was no answer except for another small grin against Alex's throbbing cock. Dylan's tongue dragged over him repeatedly, one hand holding the base of Alex's dick steady as he licked and sucked and kissed hot skin.

It was an impossible angle, with Dylan crouched on the floor and Alex trying to sprawl in the seat, but somehow Dylan made it work. He used as much tongue as he could, something Alex had told Dylan repeatedly that he loved, and his suction was light but steady. Alex could feel himself getting closer and closer to the edge that had already been right there to begin with.

“Dylan,” he whispered, not knowing what he really wanted to say. Both hands clutched the vinyl upholstery of the truck and Alex’s chest heaved. God, close. So close.

“Go when you’re ready,” Dylan whispered back, then dropped his head down again for a long pull on Alex’s prick.

“I’m always rea-- oh, fuck!” Alex went rigid and held himself there, balancing on the edge of perfectly still, and then his climax rushed up the base of his spine and out into Dylan’s warm, willing mouth. Alex shuddered with the force of it and couldn’t help the whimpers that escaped as Dylan caught all of his fluid and licked Alex clean.

He hadn’t even caught his breath when Alex was pushed back into the seat and Dylan was scrambling to straddle him. “Oh God, oh God, oh God,” Dylan was mumbling to himself, one hand trying to open the belt of his uniform and not succeeding. “Help. Alex, help me, Jesus.”

Alex blinked away his remaining fuzziness and sat up a little straighter. “Here, shh. Gotcha.” He settled Dylan on his lap and deftly unbuckled the man’s belt. The regulation uniform slacks opened easily and then Dylan was making a grab for his own cock.

“God, thank you,” Dylan panted, closing his eyes and jacking himself roughly. “Goddamn, but you’re hot.” He swallowed and thrust into his fist and Alex watched him in a daze.

“On me. On me!” Alex lifted the hem of his t-shirt and exposed a strip of skin. Within moments, Dylan uttered a low cry and then painted Alex’s stomach with white, warm streaks of come.

Alex dipped a finger into the drips of liquid and rubbed it into his belly. He raised that hand to his mouth and took a taste of the salted sugar while Dylan watched him, panting. “Alex, God. Don’t do that to me while I’m working. I won’t be able to finish my shift.”

“Mine,” Alex said softly, licking at his finger again and then reaching up for a kiss. “Mine. And I’m lucky.”

Dylan kissed him back with a smile. “I told you before. We both are.”

There were napkins in the glove box, thankfully, and somehow they both got cleaned up and presentable again. Alex shifted sideways on the seat and watched Dylan examine himself in the small mirror on the sun visor. “Hey,” he said, a sudden thought occurring

to him. “You don’t have any animals in the back, do you?” Alex hadn’t sensed any, but then again, he’d been really focused on other things.

“Not right now. I dropped a couple off before my break, though. One wandering cat and one spitting-mad raccoon. I almost darted him because he wouldn’t settle down enough to let the trap close, but he worked his way in.” Dylan rolled his eyes and flipped the visor back up.

Alex was absurdly grateful that the raccoon hadn’t still been in the back of the truck when he’d dragged Dylan outside. It would have put a huge damper on things for Alex to have to listen to the fury and fear of a trapped wild animal.

“I should go in.” Alex sighed and looked toward the lights of the clinic. He would have liked a few minutes to visit the shelter next door and spend some quality time with the animals, but his lunch was nearly over and he knew Dylan’s was, too.

There was a warm hand on his jaw and then Dylan was sliding across the seat to be close to Alex. “I’ll be home when you get there in the morning,” he murmured, just before closing the distance and kissing Alex softly. “And we’ll talk about whatever’s bugging you. I know you love that place and you don’t want to leave. Don’t let that asshole chase you out, Alex. He’s so used to getting his own damn way by bullying and being a dick. You don’t want to leave there because he got his way.”

It was true; he didn’t. Alex nodded and closed his eyes, nuzzling into the hand that Dylan still had on his cheek. “It’s just frustrating.” Everything about it was frustrating. Being stuck at the desk, not as much exposure to the animals, Gordon. God, especially Gordon. What a fucking prick.

“I know. But it’s not permanent. Only six more months of school, right? And then you can apply as a tech while you finish up. Not forever, honey.” Dylan kissed him again.

“Not forever.” Alex sighed again and straightened up. “Thanks.” He smiled at Dylan and reached for the door handle. “I’ll take you out for pancakes in the morning.”

“Waffles.” Dylan nodded. “You can have pancakes. I’m a waffle man.”

Alex chuckled. “Waffles.” He dropped one more kiss on Dylan’s mouth and got out of the truck, heading toward the clinic without looking back.

Gordon was lounging in Alex’s chair, feet up on the desk. One of his shoes was resting casually on the open pages of *Amphibian Medicine and Captive Husbandry*. “You’re late.”

“You’re not my boss. Get your fucking foot off my textbook.” Alex yanked it out from under Gordon’s shoe, taking a small sense of satisfaction when it made the man slide a little off-balance.

Gordon sat up and put both feet on the floor. He made no other move to get up, however, choosing instead to lean both elbows on the desk and peer out the front door. "You were out there with your boyfriend, weren't you?"

"The fuck does that matter? He brought me lunch." If you counted 'a really excellent blow job' as lunch, and Alex did.

"Whatever." There was no mistaking the disgust in Gordon's voice, but since it was his usual tone, Alex just ignored it. Gordon stood and gave Alex a look. "I bet it wouldn't be cool with his supervisor if they knew he was using his lunch break for sex."

Alex's hand flashed out and snagged the front of Gordon's shirt almost before either of them knew he had moved. "What he does on his break is his fucking business." His voice was a low snarl and Alex saw Gordon's eyes widen. "But if you're so concerned, I'll call him up and have him come in here. You can ask him yourself."

Gordon jerked out of Alex's grip and made a show of straightening his wrinkled scrubs. "I'll let you pass on the message. And don't touch me like that again, Myers, or I'll tell the doctors that you threatened me." He stood, rounded the desk, and disappeared through the door that led to the back rooms.

Alex dropped into the chair that Gordon had vacated and scowled at his books. All the good feelings Dylan had inspired in him only minutes before were now vanishing like smoke wisps.

And once again, staying at the clinic didn't seem worth it.

Chapter Eleven

“I wish you could get tonight off.” Alex stared morosely at Dylan as he dressed for work in his familiar tan uniform.

“I tried.” Dylan looked back at him in the mirror as he buttoned his shirt. “And thank you for not making that last hickey above the collar, by the way.” He winked and his green eyes twinkled.

“I aim to please. And I know it was short notice; I didn’t even know class was cancelled until last night. But I still wish we could have a night off together.” Alex picked at a loose thread on the bedspread. It was his first class that was actually in a classroom, so having it cancelled left him with a wide-open evening.

Dylan buckled his belt, still looking at Alex in the mirror. “So come with me.”

Alex frowned. “Where?”

“To work,” Dylan laughed. “Ride along with me tonight. I know it’s not the most thrilling date, but at least we’ll be together. And I’ll buy you donuts on my break.”

He sat up, already scanning the bedroom for his tennis shoes. Macavity made a disgruntled ‘mrr’ noise at being disturbed from his nap against Alex’s back.

Sleep sleep sleep. ...snack? Sleep.

Alex ignored the cat and stood up to grab his jeans from where they’d landed on the floor. “Ride along? I’m allowed?”

Dylan nodded. “Yeah, sure. People do it all the time. Ride with me and help keep the streets safe from the occasional confused opossum.”

“Awesome.” Alex spotted the edge of his tennis shoes peeking out from under the bed and yanked them out. “I won’t even tempt you to mess around.”

“Then you can’t come,” Dylan laughed, jingling his keys in his hand. “What kind of boring night would that be?”

Macavity sat in the window and watched them get into Dylan’s car. Alex was too far away to hear the *why leave no food hungry hungry* message the cat was inevitably sending, but imagining it was close enough. Macavity was still several pounds overweight, and Alex had a sneaking suspicion that the cat was nosing its way into Karma’s room at night and eating the scraps that the ferret pushed onto the floor.

They reached the Fish and Game office and transferred from Dylan’s pickup to the white truck that held eight air-conditioned animal carrier compartments in the bed. The spaces

weren't huge, but it was basically just a temporary holding cell for the animal until the officer who was driving the truck could reach a shelter or clinic and drop off the critter.

Alex slid into the passenger side and remembered the last time they'd been in the truck together. "So I guess since we christened the seat already, we don't need to do it again." Too bad, his cock had already started to firm up just from the memory of the last time.

"There's more than one truck," Dylan grinned. "This probably wasn't even the one I was driving that time."

Well, duh. Alex rolled his eyes at himself. He'd seen the row of white trucks bearing the county seal out behind the office building. "So technically, we could christen this one too?"

"Sure. But if I let you seduce me on my break, I'm not trying to squish myself into that little space on the floor again. We can try to make it home and back in forty-five minutes." Dylan started up the truck and pulled out of the lot.

"Oh, no problem. I can totally get off in that time."

"Me, too." Dylan winked.

Alex cracked a window, happy to let the evening breeze ruffle through his hair while he watched the neighborhood houses pass by. "Where to first? You have areas to patrol, right?"

"Right. But I also have a list of stuff I have to do tonight that was left for me by my supervisor, and the first thing is to investigate two barking dog complaints. After those are taken care of, we'll patrol until I get word from headquarters that I'm needed somewhere else." Dylan indicated the file folder on the seat between them. "You can check the printout and tell me the address of the first house."

The address on the printout was a street Alex recognized. He rattled off the address to Dylan, who seemed to know exactly where it was. It took them about eight minutes to pull up to a modest-looking one story house.

A high-pitched yapping could be heard even through the closed windows of the truck. "Little dog," Dylan sighed. "I don't mind the little dogs. But sometimes the owners of little dogs feel like they have to make up for... well, having a little dog. Wait here." He rolled his eyes and got out of the truck.

Alex watched him straighten his shirt and adjust his belt before going to the front door. Dylan held a clipboard in one hand and a restraint pole in the other, though Alex knew he wasn't going to use it. Dylan had told him a while ago that they were required to carry it when approaching any house with a dog, big or small.

The door finally opened after Dylan's second push of the doorbell. Alex was grateful for the distance between himself and the house when a small dog, presumably the source of the obnoxious yapping, appeared between the middle-aged woman's legs. Even from inside the truck, Alex could sense the dog's anxiety.

*Strangerstrangerstrangerstranger I AM A WATCHDOG strangerstrangerstranger
ALERT ALERT DANGER strangerstrangerstranger!!*

"Christ," Alex muttered to himself. The dog probably gave off a constant stream of alarm all day long, though his owner wouldn't be able to hear it. Alex wanted to shove socks in his ears just from listening to the past ten seconds of it. And holy shit, no wonder someone had lodged a complaint. You didn't have to hear the actual message to be annoyed by the yipping.

He couldn't hear what Dylan was saying. The dog was making it impossible to hear anything anyway, and Alex wasn't even close to it. Alex watched as Dylan presumably explained about the complaint and handed over a brochure and some other papers. The dog's owner looked cross, shoved the dog behind her with one foot, and closed the door. Immediately the noise ceased.

Dylan rolled his eyes at Alex on his way back to the truck. He got back into the driver's side and started it up. "They're all the same. When will they figure out that they can't plead innocence to the law and get away with it?"

"Which law? There are a lot of them."

"The one that says all dogs have to be licensed." Dylan snorted and pulled away from the curb. "I wouldn't have even had to go to her house for the complaint if the dog had been licensed. She would have gotten a letter in the mail about it instead."

Alex nodded. "Which she would have ignored, and then you -- or someone -- would have had to go out there anyway."

"Right." Dylan laughed and shook his head. "Can't win." He paused at a stop sign in an intersection.

Alex took advantage of the stop and leaned over as far as his seatbelt would allow. "You win," he said, nuzzling against Dylan's neck. "With me, anyway."

That got him a sound kiss and a grope over his jeans. "Some day, you'll have to teach me how to say corny shit like that and not sound lame. You're good at it." Dylan gave Alex one more small kiss and started driving again.

The warm, glowy feeling stayed with Alex through Dylan's next stop, which was much the same as the first one with the exception of the dog being about sixty pounds heavier

than the first one. A young man was the owner and the dog barked noisily when Dylan rang the doorbell, but at least stopped when commanded to by the owner.

The strong watchdog vibe was much the same, although Alex found it easier to take when the animal wasn't making incessant noise. It was the dog's job, after all, to guard the house. Alex just wished dogs weren't so loud.

After completing his second visit, Dylan poked through the file folder again when he was back in the truck. "That's all the home visits I have to do for now," he mused. "Unless something comes through on the radio, which it could." He stopped and looked over at Alex. "Bored yet? I can always drop you off at home."

Alex smiled and shook his head. "Nah, it's cool watching you work. Not bored, I like it."

"Lucky man just won himself a hand job. Let me know when you want to collect."

"Uh. Now?"

Dylan checked his watch. "Make it two hours from now and it's break time."

He told his cock to behave and nodded. "Got it. Hand job for me in two hours."

"Noted."

Patrolling the streets was a quiet job, Alex soon learned. Dylan had a large area, so it took a while for them to revisit the same streets, but within a sixty minute time period, they'd covered everywhere on Dylan's route.

The only variation from routine came when Dylan's radio crackled and he was notified of road kill on one of the busier streets. A raccoon or maybe a rabbit, dispatch wasn't sure, but Alex figured it didn't matter. Scraping up a dead animal was sad and disgusting, no matter what it was.

He had a moment of panic while Dylan drove to the cross streets that had been given to him over the radio. What if the animal was still alive? Alex had heard the messages from nearly-dead animals and wasn't anxious to repeat the experience. The ones who were dying peacefully were quiet and gentle as they passed. The ones who were dying of a grievous injury? Not so much with the quiet.

As they approached the street where the animal was, Alex concentrated hard. He'd be able to hear the agony well before they got close, but thankfully, there was only silence. Whatever had been hit by a moving vehicle was definitely not alive.

The smell, however, hit both of them as soon as they turned onto the street.

"Ugh, skunk." Dylan made a face and wrinkled his nose. "It had to be a skunk."

“They make good pets,” Alex said, then bit his tongue. Again, illegal. He was surprised Dylan hadn’t turned him in the first time Karma had bit him. “Um, I mean. So I’ve heard.”

“Sure you have,” Dylan laughed. “I don’t want to know.” He reached over to the glove compartment and retrieved a pair of latex gloves from a box.

Alex put a pair on as well. “I can help.”

Dylan paused with one leg out of the truck. “You sure? I don’t know how long it’s been there.”

“I’m sure. I see sick and injured animals all the time, remember? I help with -- well, used to help with -- surgeries and stuff. Not a problem.” It really wasn’t, as long as the animal wasn’t in extreme pain or under duress. And since the skunk had definitely kicked the bucket, Alex was safe.

“Okay then.” Dylan shrugged. “Not going to turn down help.”

With gloves, plastic bags, and a diluted bleach spray, the street was skunk-free in fifteen minutes. The skunk’s scent, however, lingered in the air.

“It’ll fade by morning.” Dylan spritzed the asphalt one last time with the cleaning solution and put the sealed bag into one of the animal holding areas behind the truck. “Next stop, humane society. They’ll cremate it for us.”

They dropped off the skunk with no incident and Dylan radioed in that it had been taken care of. Alex was just starting to wonder how much longer until he could get Dylan somewhere private when Dylan looked at him and said with a grin, “Break time.”

“Cool. Go to the shelter and pull around back.” Okay, so he’d been thinking about where to go. Alex blamed the semi-wood that he’d had all night.

“The shelter, huh? Sounds familiar.” Dylan immediately turned the truck in that direction and sent Alex a sideways glance.

“Yeah. But last time we were interrupted, and besides, it was just some light messing around. This time I want to fuck you.” It was true. Alex had been hard for it for hours.

Dylan gave him another sideways look but didn’t say anything else. Alex smiled to himself when he felt the truck accelerate just a little.

They pulled up to the back entrance, the one that couldn’t be seen from the road or the clinic next door. It was well past closing time for the shelter, but Alex didn’t trust that Gordon or someone else over at the emergency hospital wouldn’t look out the front door

and see Dylan's truck. The back entrance shielded the truck from the street and from other prying eyes.

Alex jumped out and headed up the back path. He dug the keys from his pocket and had the back door open and the alarm disarmed before Dylan had made it halfway to the door.

"Impatient," Dylan murmured, when he reached Alex. "I like that. I like that a lot."

"You don't know the half of it." Alex yanked him inside and shut the door. "Feel." He grabbed Dylan's hand and made him cup the bulge in Alex's jeans. "See?" Alex pushed shamelessly against Dylan's palm.

Dylan ground a matching bulge against Alex's thigh. "Oh, I see. So do something about it." His voice was a low growl, purring softly in Alex's ear.

Alex curled his fingers into Dylan's waistband and pulled. There was a small, unused office immediately to the left of the door they'd just entered. Mostly used for storage, Alex knew there was an overstuffed couch in there that had been donated earlier in the year. Just what they needed.

He practically dragged Dylan into the small room and shut the door. The only light came from a single panel in the ceiling, but Alex didn't need light for what he wanted to do. By now, he knew Dylan's body by touch and by heart.

The 'heart' part seemed to be more and more important these days.

"Where?" Dylan whispered. He remained in the same spot where Alex had yanked him and Alex got the feeling that he, not Dylan, was in charge. For right now, at least. It was a heady contrast to see Dylan dressed in his uniform, but completely willing to be told what to do and when to do it.

Alex pointed to the sofa. "There." He found himself whispering, too, although there was no one that would hear them. "Over the arm of the couch."

Dylan nodded and moved in that direction, already unbuckling his belt. He reached for the buttons on his shirt, but Alex stopped him.

"No. Leave your shirt on, and pants around your hips." All right, so he had a small uniform fetish. A lot of guys did.

Again, Dylan complied, letting his pants ease down around his hips but no farther. He bent over the arm of the sofa and braced a hand on it, resting his other hand on the back of the couch. "Is this okay?" His voice was still low.

“Perfect.” And it was, too. Dylan’s back was slightly arched, making his ass stick out just a little. His head was bowed and his posture was submissive. With the contrast of the authority of the uniform, it was a heady mix for Alex.

He’d shoved a condom and a blister pack of lube in his pocket before leaving the house. Just a precautionary measure, Alex had told himself earlier. His dad had always taught him it was better to have what he didn’t need than be stuck without something necessary.

And clearly, the condom and lube were necessary. Alex congratulated himself on his foresight. He got the condom on and was glad it was lubed, because he wanted all the rest of the slick for Dylan. There was no way Alex was sending the man back to work with a limp.

Dylan was still waiting quietly. The only outward sign of impatience he showed was to dig his fingers tightly into the fabric of the couch while he waited for Alex to get on with it. Otherwise he remained completely silent and relaxed. It made Alex’s dick even harder.

He slicked two fingers and stood directly behind Dylan. Alex let his cock rest against the curve of one of Dylan’s asscheeks while he traced the crack of Dylan’s ass. “Stand still for me,” he whispered, letting one finger slip into Dylan’s hole.

“Standing still,” Dylan whispered back. The only movement Alex could sense him making was his steady breathing.

Dylan’s ass was tight, though Alex could feel the deliberate relaxation happening as he breached Dylan with both fingers. Dylan’s breathing never changed, but his grip on the sofa grew tighter the deeper Alex probed. “Yes. Like that.” Alex encouraged him to relax, although he knew they were both wound up tight.

Alex withdrew his fingers and lined himself up. With one hand on Dylan’s shoulder and the other guiding his cock, Alex pushed in and then stopped, trying to find a center of balance that wouldn’t make him come just from the tightness and pressure surrounding his prick.

“Move,” Dylan finally whispered after long seconds of stillness and silence. “Please? Please move.”

Trying to resist the soft plea would have been futile even if Alex had wanted to. He pushed forward very gently until he was completely buried in Dylan’s ass, then angled his hips up and nudged.

Dylan rewarded Alex immediately with an indrawn breath and a softly groaned, “Yes. There.” He arched his back even more to try and get what Alex assumed was more pressure on his gland.

Alex pulled back a little and then did it again. He glided in and waited until he was completely buried before nudging up a little. Dylan gasped again and dropped his head.

“There. Please, again. Alex. Again.”

The easy rhythm of it, over and over and over, almost lulled Alex into a false sense of security. He almost believed that he could keep this up all night long without coming, just easy, gentle thrusting and rubbing. All night long, no problem.

His prick, however, had other ideas. Alex felt his balls tighten long before he was ready. “Damn,” he murmured, his fingers tightening on Dylan’s waist. “Gonna go. Ready?” He punctuated the question by sinking back in and rubbing up one more time along Dylan’s prostate.

Alex expected Dylan to answer in the affirmative with a nod or a grunt. He wouldn’t have been surprised with a head shake, either, since there had been plenty of times when they weren’t quite in sync with their orgasms. But what he didn’t expect was for Dylan to toss his head back and come without a sound and without laying a hand on himself.

“Oh, God.” Alex froze in place when he felt Dylan go. He watched over Dylan’s shoulder as Dylan painted the arm and seat cushion of the couch with warm, white ribbons of spunk. Dylan’s cock pulsed on its own, his climax being pulled out of him with no other assistance than Alex’s cock in his ass.

Dylan clenched around Alex’s prick and Alex gasped out loud into the silence. He pulled back an inch or two and then slammed back in just as he started to come, filling the condom and shuddering hard against Dylan’s back. His fingers dug into Dylan’s waist and Alex could feel the tight skin give way under his nails.

They stood there, panting, until Alex felt things going a little tilty. He carefully withdrew and tied off the rubber before burying it under a pile of shredded paper in the trash. When Alex returned to the couch, Dylan was still standing in the same place, uniform slacks around his hips.

Alex moved behind him and tugged Dylan’s pants up gently. “You okay?” he chuckled, trying to fasten Dylan’s belt from behind.

“Yeah,” Dylan said dreamily, dropping his hands to help Alex with the belt. “Wow.” Together, they got Dylan redressed and then dropped onto the couch, avoiding the wet spots. “Should probably clean that,” Dylan mused.

“Before we go,” Alex nodded. He cuddled Dylan close and then yawned. “I want a nap.”

“Me, too. Too bad I have four hours left of an eight-hour shift.” Dylan nuzzled Alex and then kissed his cheek. “But if you’ll stay with me, I can power through it.”

They heaved themselves up and Alex found something to scrub the couch clean while Dylan straightened his clothes and smoothed down his hair. By the time they'd piled back into the truck, Alex could hear his stomach rumbling.

"We missed lunch," Alex sighed, not upset about it in the least.

"True. Looks like drive-through's our best bet." Dylan winked at him and turned toward the closest fast-food restaurant. "Veggie tacos okay?"

Veggie tacos were perfect. Alex ate three of them and watched Dylan deftly eat a quesadilla while driving.

They had just started to circle around to begin the street patrol again when Dylan's radio crackled and he reached out a hand to tune in the report. "Officer Travers, Truck 509. Report to 1534 Greenville Street for investigative animal abuse. 1534 Greenville."

Dylan swore softly under his breath and made a right turn. "This fucker again."

Alex crumpled the wax paper from his taco and looked over at Dylan. He knew abuse investigations were part of Dylan's job, but somehow he hadn't thought that he'd actually be with Dylan when he was called to check one out. "You know the address?"

Dylan gave a terse nod and kept driving. "This guy likes to go away on trips and leave his dogs chained up in the backyard. One small bowl of food and water for both of them and no shelter from sun or rain or wind or anything. Protocol is to make a visit and give him thirty to sixty days to bring the animal up to health regulations. We seized a dog from him last year but now he's got new ones. I've been out to his house twice already."

Alex's stomach lurched. He'd seen and handled plenty of sick and injured animals, but they were almost always from the hands of loving, concerned owners. Very few abuse cases came into the clinic, although he knew the shelter had rescued several neglected rabbits and cats.

When Dylan turned onto the correct street, he sent a glance in Alex's direction. "This might be tough." Alex could hear the apology and regret in his voice.

"I can handle it." He wasn't sure if that was true, but he was about to find out.

Chapter Twelve

The house looked innocuous enough when Dylan pulled into the driveway. It was nearing midnight so the street itself was dark and quiet, but there was a shrill barking that could be heard even through the closed truck windows.

Thirsty thirsty thirsty alone dark alone thirsty hungry thirsty thirsty thirsty!

Alex's first reaction was to jam his hands over his ears to block out the pitiful sound, but he managed to stop himself in time and gritted his teeth instead. "I'll wait," he ground out, hoping he didn't sound too strained.

Dylan nodded in sympathy. "Seeing it is tough. If the guy's not home again, I'll have to go in the back myself and get the dogs. You can wait here."

It wasn't the 'seeing it' part that had Alex worried, but he nodded and offered Dylan a weak smile. "Sure. Sorry I can't help."

"No problem. I don't expect you to." Dylan leaned over to kiss him and got out of the truck, heading up the walk to the front door.

Alex sighed and leaned back with his eyes closed. He'd seen abuse before. One of his school courses was all about how to recognize it. It wasn't looking at the animal that was difficult; it was hearing it. Abused animals had a certain piercing quality to their distress that triggered the migraine switch in Alex's brain. Even Tabitha, who didn't have as strong a sense of it as Alex, had complained of headaches when watching any of the animal cop shows on television.

He kept his eyes closed and resisted the continued urge to plug his ears. He was only getting vibes from one dog and Dylan had said there were two, so maybe the other one wasn't in bad shape. Alex hated to think of any other reason why he could only hear one dog.

The barking stopped abruptly and Alex opened his eyes just as Dylan came through the side gate, carrying a limp body. As soon as the gate closed behind him, the barking started up again and the poor dog's message pierced Alex's ears.

Alone sad sad alone thirsty alone thirsty!

Against his better judgment, Alex got out of the truck and reached for the keying on Dylan's belt. "Let me unlock it." He fumbled with the right key and picked one of the compartments on the lower level of the truck bed, trying to get the vented door open wide enough for Dylan to slide the dog inside. Alex's head was beginning to pound and for a moment he didn't think he'd be able to get the key in, but then it clicked and the door opened.

“Thanks.” Dylan sounded terse and there were lines of strain around his mouth. He gently deposited the dog inside the compartment. “I need to go get the other one.”

Alex glanced inside at the still dog. “Is it...?” It would explain why he wasn’t getting any messages from it at all.

“Nope. Alive. It was warm when I picked it up. He lifted his head, but couldn’t get up on his own. I’ll be right back.”

Alex nodded and closed the door of the cage without a word. The headache was increasing by leaps and bounds and he was insanely grateful that the dog was too weak to even sound a distress signal. The other one was doing a good enough job for both of them.

The barking stopped again and then Dylan reappeared, leading an incredibly thin animal at the end of a restraint pole. As soon as Alex turned to look at him, a wave of anxiety slammed into him and he reeled back against the truck.

The dog was walking, but barely. The poor thing staggered behind Dylan with its head hung low and its nose nearly touching the ground. Dylan was coaxing it with softly murmured words, but they were inaudible to Alex over the sound of the dog’s thoughts.

Hungry. Thirsty. Cold. Hungry. Thirsty. Cold.

Over and over, the three words drilled themselves into Alex’s head. He laid his palms flat against the truck door and tried to let the dizziness pass, but as Dylan came closer with the rail-thin animal, Alex’s headache grew to nearly intolerable levels.

“Can you get the other cage for me?” Dylan asked.

It took Alex a moment to realize he was being spoken to. The sound in his head resulting from the starving dog was blocking out all other noises and Dylan’s voice was just a hum in the background. With a huge effort, Alex peeled himself off the side of the vehicle and managed to scoop up the keys he had dropped.

Alex was grateful for the dark as he slid along the edge of the truck and reached up to unlock a compartment for Dylan. He didn’t have to see himself in the mirror to know he was pale, something Dylan would surely notice once he took a good look at Alex.

Somehow Alex got the key in the right place and the door open. Once Dylan had bent down to lift the undernourished dog into the truck, Alex slid away again, moving slowly toward the passenger door and hoping he could make it inside before he fell down. He said a small prayer of thanks when the truck door opened and he climbed in, stomach rolling. He could still hear the cries of distress from the dog.

When Dylan got back in the truck, Alex didn't open his eyes, but the waves of tension Dylan was radiating didn't need to be seen. Alex could feel it as soon as the man sat down next to him.

"That fucker's going to jail." Dylan started the engine, but didn't put the truck in gear.

"Why wasn't he in jail the first time?" The words were an effort, but Alex was relieved that he sounded somewhat normal. His migraine was increasing and there were small sunbursts of light behind his closed eyelids.

Dylan gave an audible sigh. "Because he got away with paying a hefty fine. But I'm making sure he pays with more than just money this time. Fuck, he'll get treated better in prison than he treated those animals. At least he'll get three meals and a place to sleep. He makes me sick."

Dylan sounded more angry than Alex had ever heard him, but Alex didn't want to risk opening his eyes and turning his head to see Dylan. Instead, Alex just made a noise of agreement and tried desperately to tune out the pitiful stream of sound that only he could hear.

Alex felt the truck shift and back down the driveway. His stomach rolled again and he prayed his tacos from earlier in the night would stay down, but as they gained speed and then rounded a corner, Alex knew he wouldn't be so lucky.

"Pull over," he gasped, one hand already on the door handle.

By some miracle, Dylan didn't question him. The truck screeched to the curb and Alex forced the door open just in time. He leaned over and threw up on the sidewalk, hoping in the back of his mind that there would be street cleaning tomorrow.

Alex felt Dylan slide across the seat and start rubbing his back in slow, soothing circles. "Easy," Dylan murmured. "You're all right."

His stomach lurched again and the rest of Alex's dinner came up. Alex coughed and spit and tried not to fall out of the truck, since the dizziness hadn't receded and his head was still pounding. The dog in the back had renewed its terrified thoughts when it felt the truck stop, and Alex was afraid for a moment that his head might actually explode.

When he was sure his stomach was empty, Alex dragged himself back up and put his head back against the seat, panting. Things were getting spinny and dark. "Dylan," he said carefully, clutching at the door with one hand.

"Are you okay? Alex!" Dylan put a warm hand on Alex's forehead. "Baby. Tell me what you need. What's wrong?"

“I need...” Alex’s voice was coming out as a whisper, so he cleared his throat and tried again. “I need you to take me...” he paused, trying to get the words in the right order.

“God, where?” Dylan sounded panicked. That wasn’t good. Dylan never panicked.

“To my sister’s. Take me to my sister’s house.”

It was the last thing he remembered before passing out.

When he came to, he could feel ice on his forehead and behind his neck. His head was still throbbing, but the overwhelming nausea and spinning had stopped, so Alex counted that as a win.

He tried opening his eyes slowly. Everything stayed in one place, which was good. He blinked at the ceiling and tried to remember exactly what had happened.

“You’re not serious.” Dylan’s voice sounded incredulous.

“I’m completely serious. Why would I make up something that far-fetched?” That was Tabitha, and for a moment Alex was confused. Why would he be hearing Tabby? Was Greg there, too? Man, Greg was probably pissed at being woken up in the middle of the night.

“I... have no idea.” Dylan, voice still filled with disbelief. “And you can hear them, too? Both of you?”

Oh, shit. Alex closed his eyes again and breathed very quietly, hoping not to alert them that he was awake.

“Not like he can. Alex was always way more in tune with animals than I was. But I can if I concentrate, or if an animal’s giving off really strong vibes.” Tabby sounded matter-of-fact about it, but Alex knew there was nothing ordinary about what they could do. There was no way he could expect Dylan to believe her.

There was a long silence and Alex almost opened his eyes again, but then he felt the bed dip and Dylan was stretching out against Alex’s side. “I’ll talk to him about it later,” Dylan murmured, curling into Alex. “When he wakes up.”

It was tempting to keep on pretending he wasn’t awake, especially with Dylan’s warmth curled around him, but Alex knew he had to face the music eventually. “I’m awake,” he sighed, although he kept his eyes closed. The headache wasn’t quite at a manageable level yet.

Dylan sat up immediately. "Thank God. Open your eyes, honey." The relief in his voice was so evident that Alex felt guilty for not telling him sooner.

Alex opened his eyes and saw Tabitha perched on the edge of the bed, looking worried. Not as worried as Dylan, however, who laid a hand gently on Alex's face and brushed his thumb over Alex's cheekbone. "God. Are you all right? How do you feel?"

It was on the tip of his tongue to say "fine", but what came out was, "Like hell."

A furrow appeared between Dylan's brows and the corners of his mouth drew down. "You look like hell. And you scared me."

"Sorry." Alex reached out a hand toward him and Dylan took it, lacing their fingers together.

"You want some water, hon?" Tabitha made a move to stand, but Alex shook his head slightly.

"In a minute. Stay, Tab."

She did, leaning her weight onto one hand and studying Alex's face. "It was a migraine?" she asked. "Like when we were little?"

Alex nodded and tightened his fingers around Dylan's. "Uh-huh, like that. Except I've had them since then. Not often, though." That was an understatement. Alex could only remember one other time since childhood when he'd had the same kind of reaction to an animal, and it had been to a squirrel that he'd seen get hit by a car. All of his other headaches had been just that: simple headaches.

Tabitha sighed and met Alex's gaze. "I told him."

He was aware of Dylan going very still, but Alex kept their hands firmly entwined. "Yeah, I heard."

"He didn't believe me." Tabitha smiled at Dylan, then Alex.

Dylan squeezed Alex's hand. "I didn't say that. I said I'd talk to him about it later."

"It's true. She was telling the truth." It wasn't the way Alex had pictured telling Dylan about his ability, but he supposed he should be grateful that Tabitha had done the job for him. Now all that was left was convincing Dylan they weren't pulling his leg.

There was a long silence in which the three of them sat looking at each other. Alex didn't realize he was holding his breath until his head renewed its pounding. He let it out slowly and watched Dylan lick his lips.

“I don’t know if you two can do what you say you can.” Dylan looked at his fingers entwined with Alex’s. “That’s... well, it’s incredible, if you can. And not something I’ve ever even heard of before.”

“But you think we’re lying.” Alex looked at Tabitha, who gave a tiny shrug and looked sadly at the bedspread.

Dylan waited a beat or two before answering. “I think you both believe you can do it. But I don’t know what to believe.”

Alex’s heart sank. Dylan was actually taking it better than anyone could be expected to, but somehow Alex had thought that just telling Dylan would be enough. That he would trust Alex enough to believe it.

Even though it was a goddamn crazy thing to try and believe.

“I’ll get you some water,” Tabitha said. The bed moved as she got up and headed toward the door. “You want some toast or crackers or anything?”

His stomach lurched. “Not yet. Thanks, Tab. Is Greg pissed we woke him up?”

She smiled. “He’s in Atlanta on business. But yes, he would have been pissed. The man likes his sleep. I’ll be back in a bit.” She left quietly and Alex studied where his hand was still linked with Dylan’s.

“You don’t have to believe it. We sound insane, I know.”

Dylan lifted their joined hands and kissed Alex’s knuckles. “We’ll talk about it later. When you’re feeling better.” The doubt was still there, though Dylan was hiding it well.

Alex sighed and closed his eyes again.

Alex let Tabby and Dylan hover over him until dawn. When the first bit of sunlight came through the east-facing bedroom window, he sat up carefully and reached for his shoes. “We’re going home.” He looked at Dylan for confirmation.

Dylan nodded. “We’re going home. And right back to bed.”

And they did, once they’d said goodbye to Tabitha and thanked her for opening her door at three in the morning. She’d smiled tiredly and made them promise to have her and Greg over for dinner.

Both of them fell into bed immediately, ignoring Macavity’s purring meows and headbutts. *Hungryhungryhungry. Karma pest. Hungry.*

The *Karma pest* part probably should have been a warning, but Alex was too exhausted to investigate. He turned his face into Dylan's chest and was asleep within moments.

He was woken up by a thumping noise. Alex's eyes burned when he pried them open, a sure sign that he hadn't gotten enough sleep, but at least the continuous throbbing in his head had dulled.

A glance at the clock revealed that it was nearing one in the afternoon and he was alone in bed, but Alex had no more time to dwell on that fact because there was a giant crash from the living room. Macavity came shooting into the bedroom with wide-eyed panic and disappeared under the bed.

"Jesus Christ!" Alex tossed off the covers and stumbled out of bed toward the noise. He'd only gotten a few steps into the hallway before *fun fun fun fun play!* came at him full-force, and Alex groaned. Karma. He should have listened to Macavity.

Dylan's music CD tower lay on the floor, compact discs scattered everywhere. Alex winced at the mess and looked around for either Karma or Dylan. The former was nowhere to be seen, but Alex found the latter half-under the couch. "Um," Alex said to Dylan's ass, "can I help?"

"I found my coasters," came the muffled reply. "And my spare keys." Dylan backed out and held up the pilfered objects, then looked around. "Where'd she go? Little brat."

"That's what I should have named her," Alex sighed, glancing again at the upturned CD tower. "Quiet for a second, let me see if I can hear her."

Dylan snorted. "She doesn't make any noise if she's hiding."

Alex really hadn't planned on coming back to the topic so soon, but it was presenting itself neatly. "No, I can *hear* her," he explained patiently. "She has a constant running patter going. Especially if she's out playing." He tilted his head and concentrated, trying to pick up her vibes.

"You can..." Dylan snapped his mouth closed and sat back on his heels. "Right. Sure, of course. You can hear her."

Play. Play. Catcatcatcat play! Karma play. Cat.

"Oh, shit." Alex made a dash for the bedroom. Sure enough, he caught sight of a small white weasel slinking along under the edge of the comforter, trying to sneak up on Macavity. Macavity, of course, was pretending not to pay attention, but Alex could hear *Karma pest Karma eat* quite clearly.

“No you don’t,” he muttered, swooping down and halting Karma’s fearless progress with one hand. Alex scooped her up and glared at her pointed, whiskered face. “One day that cat really is going to eat you. And I’m going to let her.”

Karma twitched her whiskers at him and wriggled, demanding to be set free. *Play play play run! Play. Catcatcat. Play.*

“I don’t think so.” Alex scruffed her neck as he walked down the hall to her room. She went limp at the hold, like she always did. It was the easiest way to control her. He shouldered her door open and deposited her back into her cage, muttering things. “Try that again and I’m having you made into mittens.” Alex latched her cage and checked the lock.

He returned to the living room and found Dylan righting the CD tower. “Did she break it?” Alex asked, fully ready to shell out money for a new one.

“Huh? Oh, nah. It got a couple of scratches on the edge, but it was cheap to begin with. She didn’t do anything to it.” Dylan began reaching for CDs and sorting them alphabetically into the tower.

Alex knelt down next to him and started gathering up the discs. One or two covers were cracked and he winced, knowing that Dylan kept his CDs and DVDs meticulously clean and organized. Alex made a mental note to go out and buy some new jewel cases for him.

When there was nothing but silence for nearly ten minutes, Alex finally became uncomfortable enough to break it. “I’m sorry for last night.” It was a lame thing to say, but he didn’t know where else to start. “Uh, did the dogs get where they were supposed to go?”

“Yeah.” Dylan slid a CD back into its spot on the tower and glanced over at Alex. “When you were sleeping at Tabitha’s, I called and had them picked up. And you don’t have to be sorry, honey. Migraines are some nasty shit. My brother used to get them.” There was no mention of what had actually brought on the headache.

“I don’t get them that often. Hardly ever, actually. I probably should have paid attention to it a little earlier.” Alex knew there was no way he could have. The headache had been a direct result of the dog’s distress and had given him virtually no warning. “Will you get in trouble for not finishing your shift?”

“Nah.” Dylan shrugged. “I called in to explain. I’ve never done that before. I’ve never even taken a sick day.” He laughed a little and leaned back on his hands to look at Alex. “They can’t do anything to me, and I wouldn’t care if they did. Making sure you were okay was more important.”

Alex could feel the corner of his mouth curve and a warmth stole through his belly. “Cool,” he mumbled, looking at the floor. He continued quickly, “Um, about the whole listening to animals thing. I know it sounds crazy. I don’t expect you to understand or believe it.”

Dylan sat up and turned his attention back to the CDs. “Like I said before. I believe that you think you can do it.”

He might as well have just patted Alex on the head and given him a lollipop. Alex watched Dylan gather up the music. “It’s not just that I *think* I can do it,” he said carefully. “I can really do it. And Tabby, too, although not as well.”

The CDs in Dylan’s hand got put back into their places before he turned around again to face Alex. “We can all understand animals, to a point. You and I can probably do it better than most people because of our jobs. But Alex...” he paused and sighed a little before going on. “Honey, that doesn’t mean we can hear their thoughts. We can just try and pay close attention to their body language and signals. That’s all.”

Maybe it was the fact that he hadn’t gotten enough sleep, or that his head was still twinging with little throbs of pain. Or it could have been the fact that Karma had gotten out yet again and caused damage to Dylan’s property. Whatever it was, Alex had had enough.

He stood and tossed the CDs in his hand on the coffee table. “That’s not all,” Alex snapped. “I don’t give a shit if you believe me. But do me the courtesy of at least trying not to be condescending about it. This is the fucking reason I didn’t tell you before now. It’s the fucking reason I don’t tell anyone, ever.”

Alex turned to leave the room, but not before he saw a wrinkle appear on Dylan’s brow and a flicker of hurt flash across his face. He forced himself to walk out of the living room and down the hall into the master bath before his anger could dissipate into shame and guilt. Alex shut the door and, after a beat, locked it. He yanked the water on in the shower and slid down the wall to sit on the floor.

He stayed in the shower for almost three quarters of an hour. When he got out, Dylan had left for work.

Chapter Thirteen

Nothing really changed. Nothing that Alex could put his finger on, anyway. He and Dylan still talked, still ate their meals together, still had sex. Life since what Alex had secretly named That Night went on as usual, but Alex felt that there was always an elephant in the room.

Which was amusing, in a sick sort of way, because if there had been an elephant in the room Alex would have probably gotten irritated by the constant stream of *more peanuts*. That's what he'd heard the elephants at the zoo think, anyway.

So there was a new area in their relationship. It consisted of avoidance and skittering away from the subject when they got too close. Alex stopped talking to Macavity, Karma, and Violet when Dylan was around, even if one or all of them were driving him crazy with messages.

Karma play.

Food food hungry. Alex pet. Pet Macavity.

Mouse. Eat.

Alex had never really realized just how often he'd been listening to his pets until he became conscious of... well, of how often he listened to them.

It had been a month since That Night and Alex was wondering just how long, if ever, until things got back to normal. There was no use asking Dylan. The one time Alex had casually mentioned that things were a little off, Dylan had given Alex a strange look and then gone down on him. In the afterglow, Alex had forgotten about it.

He sighed now as he propped up his head on his hand. Work had been especially slow tonight, which was good for studying, but Alex had let his mind wander away from his books more than once. Also good was the fact that Gordon had the night off, so Alex didn't have to avoid going in the back as much as he usually did.

Alex vaguely wondered if Dylan would come by on his break, but that hadn't happened in a while. Just one more little thing to add to the list of Things That Seemed Kind Of Wrong With Their Relationship.

He was getting tired of adding things to the list.

Alex checked his watch and rubbed his eyes. Might as well take his lunch break, since studying didn't seem to be happening. He shoved away from the desk and wandered to the back of the hospital to retrieve the sandwich he'd brought from home.

Danielle was on her cell with her boyfriend and nodded at Alex when he waved his lunch bag at her. He opened the back door of the clinic and was hit with a warm breeze, one of the things he loved best about late spring.

He'd planned to just sit in his car and eat, since Alex had given up on Dylan dropping by to share their lunch break. At least in his car, he could listen to music and maybe catch a quick catnap. However, just before he crossed the back parking lot, the shelter next door caught his attention.

It had been a while since he'd gone to visit the animals in there. The last time he'd even been in the shelter was That Night, but he'd only gone in to nail Dylan over the arm of the couch in the storage room. Visiting the animals hadn't been a priority.

Alex made an abrupt left turn and headed across the parking lot to the shelter's side door. The key was still on his keyring, though it had been months since he'd volunteered there. He made a mental note to change that. Alex missed the animals, and if truth be told, he missed being able to hear and talk to them without the vague sense of unease he always felt at home these days.

He entered the dark building and didn't turn on any lights. The glowing exit signs softly illuminated the hallway as Alex made his way toward the room with the cats and rabbits. Long before he reached the doorway, he could hear *out out come out pet pet play* from the general vicinity. Underneath that were the more excitable vibes from the rabbits, but since they were always nervous, Alex ignored the tense feeling they had. Prey animals were always anxious.

He nudged the door closed behind him as quietly as he could. The walkway to the dog run was right outside the room he was in, and the dogs had been known to wake up at the slightest noise and start barking insanely. During the day was no big deal, but after midnight was a problem for the neighbors.

Before opening the bag with his lunch in it, Alex opened four cat cages and two rabbit hutches. The only cat he still recognized was Pansy. He was glad the others had been adopted, but had a twinge of regret that he hadn't gotten to say goodbye. Still, Pansy had always been his favorite. Alex was sorry she hadn't yet been adopted, but glad to see her all the same.

Three of the cats that Alex didn't know sniffed the air cautiously before coming over to explore him. *Stranger stranger stranger* sang in the air, but when they caught Macavity's scent on Alex's clothes, their whiskers twitched and they refrained from scent-marking him with their cheeks.

Pansy had no such objection, however, and when Alex sat on the floor to eat his cheese, sprouts, and avocado sandwich, she rubbed her cheeks and forehead along his legs. A big, rust-colored bunny hopped closer, but it was giving off such strong danger vibes that Alex had to chuckle.

“You don’t have to worry.” He took a bite of sandwich and regarded the rabbit. “And it’s a good thing that whoever adopts you can’t hear you shouting *danger danger people danger*. How do you expect to go home with anyone if you tell them they’re dangerous?”

Alex kept up a rambling, nonsensical, one-sided conversation with the bunny while he ate. Pansy eventually climbed into his lap and sniffed at his sandwich, and the other three cats roamed the room and kept their distance. Alex enjoyed the quiet.

His forty-five minute lunch was over much too quickly. Alex finished his chips and stuffed the peel from his orange back into the plastic bag. Pansy looked up curiously from her place on his lap and Alex reluctantly moved her back to the carpeted floor. “Need to go, sweetheart. Sorry to shove you back in there so fast.”

She meowed agreeably and let herself be picked up. Alex put her back in her cage and rounded up the other cats, most of whom weren’t happy about being out for such a short time. “Sorry,” Alex apologized again and again, wondering if maybe it was crueler to let them taste the freedom instead of just leaving them in their cages.

The rabbits, startled by the sudden movement and the yowling of the captured cats, did Alex a favor and found their own ways back to their cages. They huddled near the back and one of them played dead.

Alex snorted at them and latched the doors. Rabbits were way too skittish. He picked up his backpack and headed out to the back door, closing and locking it behind him.

He had only taken a few steps across the parking lot when an unexpected wave of animal thought came at him. It was powerful enough to make him take a step backward, and if there had been a wall nearby, he would have reached for it to steady himself. As it was, Alex stopped dead in his tracks and prayed to keep his balance.

Dangerdangeralertalarmdangerrunrunrundangerhidehidedanger

His first instinct was to tear open the door again and bolt to the room where he’d left the animals, but something told Alex that discretion was the better part of valor. He moved slowly back to the clinic door and unlocked it, slipping inside and waiting there.

There was nothing at first. Alex strained to hear whatever it was that had sent the animals into a panic, but when no sound reached his ears, he wondered if maybe they’d just spotted a raccoon or stray dog outside. He let the back door close gently behind him and listened again, and again he heard the same powerful message.

Hidedangerhidehidefightrundangerdangerrunhidefightfightrun

The “fight” part of the vibe was what startled Alex the most. Something was definitely in the room with the cats and rabbits, something that was making one or more of them want to run and hide. He started to move quietly in their direction when he heard the voices.

“Not the stupid rabbits. Get the cats, and then there’s a dog I want to get, too. And let’s see if they’ve got any snakes right now; those are always worth something.”

Alex froze. It was Gordon Sheer and he was giving orders to someone, so he wasn’t alone. What the hell was Gordon doing here after hours again? Alex recalled with clarity the time Gordon had found him and Dylan on the floor together. Alex hadn’t thought anything of it at the time, but now he wondered if there’d been something going on that Alex should have noticed.

There wasn’t really time to dwell on it now as Alex tried to listen hard to what Gordon was saying. It was difficult to hear his actual words over the alarmed vibes of the animals in the room, and almost without realizing it, Alex slowly withdrew his cell phone from his back pocket.

“The vials are in the side pocket. Bring them to me and I’ll try and inject the cats first, the way that idiot Myers showed me.”

Alex’s mouth dropped open and his finger hovered over the speed-dial button for Dylan’s cell. The night Gordon had said that the doctor wanted Alex to show him how to prep for surgery had been a lie. Gordon had only wanted to know so that he could use the needles for... well, whatever he was planning on doing with the shelter animals.

He moved down the hall toward the animal room, breathing deeply and slowly and trying not to let the animals’ distress become his own. The last thing he needed right now was a headache to knock him off his feet like the last one did.

Alex approached the room with caution, but unfortunately no person or animal was visible from his vantage point outside the doorway. The cats and rabbits were either cowering in their cages or Gordon had done something to them, since Alex figured they would have fled through the open door if they’d been allowed access.

“Bring me that little one.” Gordon sounded bored, as usual. “I know a guy that said he’d give me a hundred bucks for a calico.”

Wait, what? That’s all Gordon wanted with the animals? To sell them? That sounded insane to Alex; he knew Gordon’s family was incredibly wealthy. Gordon didn’t need the money. But then again, Alex didn’t get it when he read in the paper about a celebrity arrested for shoplifting. That didn’t make sense either. Maybe rich people were all crazy.

There was the sound of a vial being uncapped and then the other person with Gordon said, “Those cats have their claws, be--”

“Ow, fuck!” Alex heard Gordon swear and then there was the unmistakable hiss and yowl of an offended cat. “Goddamned piece of shit!”

Alex pressed Dylan’s button on his phone and stepped into the room. He didn’t say anything at first, just stood in the doorway and let Gordon notice him.

It took the man a moment to look up. Alex could see the long, red scratch down the underside of Gordon’s forearm. It was starting to bead with blood and Gordon glared at it before lifting his head to see where the cat had gone. When his gaze lit on Alex standing in the doorway, the sneer that crossed his face was both ugly and frightening.

“You. Of course, you.”

Alex folded his arms and hid his phone under one of them. He ignored the other man in the room, who didn’t quite seem to know what to do with Alex’s sudden appearance. “What the hell are you doing to the animals?” Alex asked, not really expecting an answer. He wondered if Dylan had answered the call, but didn’t dare to look at his phone.

Gordon shrugged. “Taking them. Selling them. Who cares, they’re all strays and I’m bored. People will give me money for them.” He laughed and gestured at Alex, speaking to the other person. “That’s the one I told you about. He looks kind of scared without his cop boyfriend.”

The fact that Dylan wasn’t a peace officer didn’t need to be argued. Alex felt a strange sense of relief that Gordon thought Dylan was a cop, although he wasn’t sure how to use that to his advantage in this situation. He continued to ignore the other man and spoke directly to Gordon. “Yeah, he’s on his way. He’s supposed to meet me for lunch.” It sounded lame, even to his own ears. He and Dylan were barely communicating these days.

“That’s nice. You’ll be telling him that someone broke into the shelter and must have set the animals free.” Gordon shrugged and reached for Pansy again, undeterred by the blood she’d drawn on his arm. Pansy hissed at him.

No no danger bad no must hide must hide will bite bite bite

Alex had never heard the little cat think anything remotely aggressive before. He blinked and tried to keep the headache at bay and wondered again if Dylan had picked up his phone. If not, Alex really had no idea how he was going to get out of this situation. Gordon had hit him before, wouldn’t hesitate to do it again, and this time there were two of them.

“You’re crazy,” Alex said, watching as Gordon managed to reach in and scruff Pansy. He withdrew her roughly and Alex stepped forward. “Drop her.”

Gordon waved the needle in his other hand and grinned. "I can stick you with this just as well as I can stick her. Want to try me?"

There wouldn't be enough anesthetic in the syringe to knock Alex out, but it would probably be enough to make him woozy and unsteady on his feet. Alex didn't trust what Gordon would do to him then. He kept one eye on the needle and the other eye on Pansy, who was wiggling in Gordon's tight hold.

"I'll call the police," Alex said. He was proud of how calm he sounded when his head was beginning to pound and his heart was beating fast. "I don't care about your mother's money. And she wouldn't want you stealing the shelter animals anyway." That was a pointless shot in the dark; Alex had no clue what Pamela Sheer thought about the shelter and the animals when she wasn't throwing her money at them.

"She doesn't care," Gordon laughed. "She's in the Mediterranean this month. Bruce, he's bothering me. Can you get him out of here while I finish this up?" He gave Pansy a short, violent shake and her thoughts grew even more frantic and alarmed.

Bite scratch hide bite bite run.

Alex slid to the side while still trying to watch Pansy, but the man Gordon had called Bruce cornered him against the wall. Alex glanced up at his face and was startled to see not much there but a blank expression and dull eyes. No chance of help from that quarter. Okay, if they were leaving Alex with no other choice, then he'd do what he had to do.

Bringing up a knee, Alex did his best to connect with Bruce's groin. He got it into the general area of his crotch and was rewarded with a grunt of pain from the bigger man, but Bruce didn't double over like Alex was expecting. Instead, he reached out a meaty hand for Alex's throat and yanked Alex toward him.

Dimly, Alex heard a cat screeching and the shrill squealing sound that the rabbits made when they had fear, but he really couldn't do anything about it while he was slowly being deprived of oxygen. The fingers around Alex's throat were closing in tighter and tighter, and even though Alex clawed at Bruce's hand, the pressure didn't lessen.

His cell phone dropped to the floor unnoticed. Alex thought for a moment that his eyes had automatically closed, then realized that he was still staring at Bruce's face but his vision was clouding. Little starbursts were appearing and disappearing, and perhaps the most alarming thing was that the sound of the animals was fading. Alex knew that they had to still be making noise, but he was losing his hearing along with his breath and vision.

Alex felt his knees buckling and made one last effort to dislodge Bruce's hand from his throat, but Bruce's fingers remained tightly locked around Alex's windpipe. Alex's vision finally went black and he hit the floor just as the hold on his neck loosened.

He dragged a huge breath of air into his burning lungs and tried to figure out why Bruce had let go. Alex couldn't hear anything except his blood rushing in his ears and a faint ringing sound, but the most important thing was that he could breathe, so he did. Over and over, giant gulps of air that almost tasted sweet, Alex concentrated on getting oxygen.

The first thing Alex heard when sound started coming back was raised voices. The room looked brighter and more colorful than it had a few minutes ago, and he realized there was a blue and red strobe light effect that was confusing him. Were there lights like that in the shelter? Alex couldn't remember.

He lay very still on the floor and tried to puzzle out the mystery of the colored lights while being grateful for air to breathe. Alex considered lifting his head to look around, but was worried he might attract Gordon's or Bruce's attention again. Better to just stay where he was with his eyes closed and maybe they'd think he was dead.

That brought to mind visions of the rabbits that always played dead when they were brought into the clinic, and for some reason Alex found that hilarious. He tried to keep back the laugh, but a giggle escaped anyway and he cringed, waiting for someone to realize he was alive and finish choking him.

When someone crouched next to him and laid a hand on Alex's head, he held his breath and stayed very still. Maybe he'd get lucky.

"Baby," Alex heard a familiar voice say. "Alex. Can you hear me?" There was a pause, then Alex heard a muttered, "Fuck. Nathan! Call an ambulance."

"No," Alex protested, trying to force his eyes open. "No. No ambulance." His eyes wouldn't cooperate, but Alex reached up and clutched at the hand that was petting his hair. He was pretty sure it was Dylan; at least, it sounded like him, but Alex didn't trust his own judgment at the moment.

The hand in Alex's hair stopped moving. "Oh, thank God," Dylan breathed. "Hey Nate, hold off a sec. I think he's okay."

There was a mumbled response from Nathan that Alex couldn't hear, but Alex finally managed to pry his eyelids open and focused on Dylan's face. "Hey." Alex was pleased to have gotten the one-syllable word out, though his throat hurt.

"Hey." Dylan smiled at him and resumed the gentle petting of Alex's hair. "You don't talk. Just relax and keep those baby blues open for me, okay?"

"Gordon." Alex ignored the order not to talk and closed his fingers around Dylan's wrist. "He. There was. It." The thoughts were there, but the words weren't, and Alex ground his teeth in frustration.

Dylan shifted so that he was sitting on the floor instead of crouching. “Alex,” he said firmly, “stop talking. We took care of Gordon.”

It finally occurred to Alex to glance around the room a little. The red and blue lights were coming from outside, not inside like he’d thought, and there were two other men in the room with them. A closer look revealed them to be uniformed police officers. Both of them were busy returning cats to their cages.

“Pansy?” Alex asked, suddenly remembering the little calico. He couldn’t hear her at all; he couldn’t hear any of the animals, come to think of it. That probably had mostly to do with the fact that his head was aching and his ears were still ringing.

As if she’d understood him, Pansy appeared in Alex’s line of vision, rubbing her cheek along Dylan’s thigh. “Hi, kitty,” Dylan chuckled. He smoothed the back of his hand over her head and she began to purr.

“What the hell happened?” Alex mumbled, rubbing at his eyes with the heel of one hand. Things were starting to become less confusing, though his headache wasn’t going away. He remembered why he’d been in the shelter and that Gordon had been there, too, but was unsure exactly why he was lying on the floor.

Dylan’s expression turned grim. “Sheer was just trying to torture or steal the animals for the hell of it. That’s what I gathered from the other guy, anyway. Sheer wouldn’t talk. He’s in the back of one of the squad cars out there.”

Alex wanted to ask just how Dylan had gotten there so fast, or even known that Alex was in trouble, but his thoughts were all out of order again and he could just look at Dylan blankly. “Are we going home?”

“Yes, baby.” Dylan leaned down and kissed Alex’s forehead. “Just as soon as you answer some questions that the officers have for you.”

When Alex was finally allowed to slide into the passenger seat of his own car, he was exhausted and shaky. He thought that he must have answered the questions he’d been asked in an appropriate way, but he honestly couldn’t remember the answers he’d given. He had a feeling the statement-taking would have gone on longer if it hadn’t been for Dylan rushing him out of there.

The drive home seemed shorter than usual. Alex figured that was because he’d fallen asleep halfway there. Dylan half-carried him into the house and Alex could hear the questioning vibes from Macavity as they made their way down the hall.

Hurt? Sick? Play? Food? Alex? Alex? Pet? ... Karma pest.

“Karma’s out,” Alex mumbled, but Dylan paid no attention and bundled Alex into bed.

“Sleep,” Dylan instructed. He shed his own clothes and climbed into bed with Alex, pulling the covers up around them and making a soft, warm cocoon of blankets. “Just sleep.”

He really wanted to, but Macavity leaped onto the bed next to him and gave Alex a long-suffering look. *Karma Karma Karma. Karma eat. Karma pest.*

“Karma’s out,” Alex said again, knowing the cat was only this annoyed when the ferret had managed to escape her room.

“How do you know?” Dylan laughed, lifting his head to look around the bedroom. “I can’t hear her, as usual.”

“Macavity says so,” Alex yawned.

The last thing he saw before falling asleep was Dylan watching him with a thoughtful expression.

Chapter Fourteen

“God damn it! Karma!”

Alex shoved his books off his lap and bolted up from the couch. A small white streak flashed by him and headed straight for the entertainment center, as usual. Alex made a dive for her, but Karma wriggled with glee and squeezed into the tiny space between the wall and the entertainment unit.

Dylan appeared in the doorway to the living room with a scowl on his face. “Brat! I’m making her into a pair of mittens.”

A series of soft, happy noises came from behind the unit. *Karma play play Dylan play Dylan plays with Karma.*

“She thinks you’re playing with her.” Alex couldn’t help chuckling at Karma’s obvious happiness, though he was a little alarmed by the thundercloud on Dylan’s face.

“Of course she does. She always thinks I’m playing with her. She always thinks everyone is playing with her. I’m not special.” He sounded put out and Alex grinned.

“She knows your name. You’re special.”

The scowl lessened a little. “She does not.” Dylan glared at the entertainment center.

“She does.” Alex laughed again and got down on his knees to try and fish Karma out of her spot. She backed away from his hand and wedged herself in tightly, bright eyes twinkling. “She keeps thinking your name and then the word ‘play’.”

Dylan went to the other side of the unit and knelt down. Alex could see him peeking in the opposite side, but Karma remained staunchly in the center and refused to come out either end. “Karma,” Dylan coaxed. “I’ll play with you. Get the hell out of there.”

She didn’t, of course, and after a minute Alex rolled his eyes and gave up. “Leave her alone for now. At least we know where she is. She’ll get bored and come out.”

“I don’t want her to bother Macavity.” Dylan reluctantly left the entertainment center and stretched out on the floor.

“Everyone bothers Macavity. Do you know he took all of his cat food out of his bowl and hid it under the couch so I would think he ate it and give him more?” Alex snorted and crawled over to Dylan, draping himself over Dylan’s prone body.

A low chuckle rumbled up in Dylan’s chest. “How did you find it?”

“I didn’t. I came home from work and he was so proud of himself that he kept thinking ‘hide hide hide Macavity hide’. So I went looking for what he hid.”

The low chuckle became a full-on laugh. Dylan held onto Alex and snickered for a while. “I love that cat.”

“So do I. Sometimes. Know what I love more? You being under me.” Alex illustrated his point by sliding his thigh over Dylan’s crotch and leaning down for a kiss.

Dylan complied by kissing Alex back, hands wandering up and over Alex’s shoulders to tangle in his hair. “Yeah? Gonna let me fuck you from down here?”

Alex pretended to think about it, but when his cock throbbed and began to stiffen in his jeans, there wasn’t really any hiding what he wanted to do. “Did we replace the living room lube?”

“There.” Dylan grinned and pointed under the couch.

Alex tried to scramble off Dylan, grab the bottle, and get rid of his jeans at the same time. He ended up getting tangled in his clothes and shoving the lube further under the couch by accident. “Shit. Help.” Alex pawed at his fly and peered under the sofa.

“Easy, easy.” Dylan rolled over and reached for the bottle of lube, then under one of the couch cushions for a condom. He helped Alex get his pants off and resettled Alex on top of him.

“God, thank you.” Alex didn’t know when Dylan had stripped his own jeans off and he didn’t care, as long as they were both naked. He flipped the top open and poured out too much into his fingers. “Whoops!” He glanced down at where the liquid had dripped onto Dylan’s lower belly and neatly trimmed curls.

“I got it.” Dylan winked and swept up the lube, spreading it onto his cock and giving himself a rub and stroke. His eyes locked with Alex’s while he played with himself.

Alex swallowed hard and nearly forgot what he was supposed to be doing. Dylan was jerking himself slowly, spreading the lube around and making his cock glisten with it and the beads of fluid he was leaking. Alex’s gaze fixed on the tip that kept appearing and disappearing in Dylan’s fist.

“Come on,” Dylan finally whispered. Alex blinked and remembered what the slick in his hand was for.

He got up on his knees and reached back, teasing himself a little bit along his crack while still watching Dylan stroke himself. “Keep going,” Alex pleaded. “But God, don’t come.”

“Then hurry up,” Dylan laughed, his hand moving a little faster. “And don’t expect me to last long if I’m going to watch you prep yourself.”

Alex nodded and made a slow pass over his hole with a wet finger. He shuddered and did it again before slipping his index finger inside and letting the lube ease his way. Another finger joined the first, and Dylan moaned softly, watching him.

“Do another one,” Dylan whispered, his hand stopping its lazy stroking. “Do three.”

Alex laughed roughly and squeezed his eyes shut. “I’m not going to last long either.” But he slowly worked in another finger, stretching and slicking himself.

“That’s okay. God, you’re really pretty.” Dylan’s eyes were wide and green and soft. “Hurry. Please.”

Alex withdrew immediately and reached down. He wrapped his fingers around Dylan’s and guided carefully, lowering himself onto Dylan’s prick and holding his breath at the same time. “Yes.” Dylan was so hard that he felt like an iron pole as Alex let him in.

When Alex was nearly sitting on Dylan’s thighs and Dylan’s cock was buried to the hilt Alex’s ass, Alex slowly clenched around him.

Dylan moaned again, more softly than the first time. “Do that again. No, wait. Don’t, or I’ll come.”

“You can hold it,” Alex whispered, watching as a drop of his own pre-come beaded at the tip of his cock and then dropped onto Dylan’s belly. “But I don’t know if I can.” He tried another slow squeeze and both of them groaned in unison.

“Then move,” Dylan begged, his hands clenching on Alex’s thighs. “Baby. Move.”

The drag and burn felt so good that Alex had to bite down hard on his lower lip to keep from coming. He rocked forward and then sat back, making a smooth, gliding rhythm that soon had the both of them panting and sweating.

A warm hand curled around Alex’s cock and started stroking. “You’re close, right?” Dylan asked, a sheen of perspiration on his forehead and chest. “Say you are, even if you’re not.”

“Close,” Alex gasped, clenching again and thrusting forward into Dylan’s hand. He worked himself between the cock in his ass and the fist around his prick, letting it build and build until he knew something had to explode or risk passing out. “Dylan!” Alex shuddered and cried out, his cock pulsing and spraying across Dylan’s chest.

Dylan made a strangled noise and pushed up hard, his head going back and neck arching on the carpet. His entire body trembled with his climax and Alex could feel Dylan's cock throb deep in his ass.

Dylan reached up and drew Alex down to him. They were both shaking a little and clinging to each other. Alex went carefully, searching for Dylan's mouth on his way, looking for kisses. "That was fast," he whispered.

"I know." Dylan laughed and held Alex close. "Round two will take longer, I promise."

Alex smiled into Dylan's neck. "I like the idea of round two. After a shower and a nap, maybe."

Dylan made an agreeable sound and cuddled Alex close, seemingly in no hurry to either clean up or get up.

Alex was happy to lie in Dylan's embrace, sleepy from his orgasm. He'd just begun to drowse when he felt Dylan tense beneath him. "What's--" Alex didn't finish asking the question before he was rudely deposited on the carpet. "Hey," he grumbled.

From his vantage point, Alex could see Dylan as he reached under the couch, ass in the air. "Ha!" Dylan crowed triumphantly. "Gotcha." He extracted a wiggling Karma from beneath the sofa.

"I told you she'd come out," Alex laughed. "She always does."

Play, Karma thought eagerly. Play. Play with Dylan. Play play play. ...Sleep.

Alex snorted. "She's tired. Make a break for it while you can and put her back."

Dylan scruffed Karma and watched her yawn. "Come on, you," Alex could hear him murmuring on his way down the hall. "You're lucky I'm keeping you."

Alex smiled at the ceiling. They were all lucky Dylan was keeping them.

End