



TOMCAT JONES

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Chapter One

You guys ever heard the old saying about “the cat who walks by himself”?

Yeah, I don’t know the rest of the cliché either. It’s a load of crap anyway. Especially for a guy like me.

My name’s Thomas Cattrell Jones, T.J. for short. My parents had a rotten sense of humor. I teach animal behavior theory when the local college has the budget and the whim to take me on, and I turn into your basic tabby cat from time to time, more often than that if something rocks my world. What can I say? It’s a thing.

* * * * *

“Being ‘in love’” —T.J. made quote fingers— “never changes anything.”

Arden gave the grocery cart a hard shove to get it past a sticky mess of spilled pickle juice on the aisle floor. “The hell it doesn’t. Are you stoned? That reminds me. Corn chips or Pringles?”

“Why limit ourselves? Doritos.” T.J. stretched up to tip the topmost bag on the shelf into their cart. It landed with a crunchy *paft!* noise between two cans of guacamole and a tub of sour cream. “Mmm. I can feel your arteries hardening as we speak.”

“Mine?” Arden, tall and skinny and towheaded, grabbed a jar of peanuts and read the nutritional information, snickering to himself. “Where are you in all of this coronary failure, standing nobly by with a skull in your hand, saying ‘alas, we hardly knew you’?”

T.J. had to stretch up on tiptoe to manage it but bounced his palm off the back of Arden’s head with a sharp snap of the wrist. “No. For one, you’re misquoting. For another, there’s no way I’m eating any of this crap.”

“Liar. You say you’ll stick to celery, but before we know it, you’ll be in the ranch dip and then the tofu chili wings will go down. It’ll be slaughter, I tell you. Wholesale

slaughter of innocent soybeans. Ugh. Speaking of which, ranch dip or blue cheese? If I'm having a heart attack, I'm taking you with me, pal."

"Yeah, yeah." T.J. swung the cart around to face due south. "Black bean burgers. That's what I want."

"You are a disgrace to testicles everywhere."

"If it'll make you happy, I'll eat two of them on a white bun, add three slices of cheese, and douse the whole thing in ketchup, mustard, and mayonnaise."

"Soy cheese? How many things can they make out of one innocent bean?"

"You'd be surprised. And no, not soy cheese. Processed. American. Orange-colored glue. Mmm-mmm."

Arden considered that. "Acceptable compromise."

"Never should have gotten you that word-a-day calendar."

"Smart-ass."

T.J. shrugged. "We're all good at what we're good at."

"Very Zen. Which is why, in the whole of God's green creation, I don't get a vegetarian cat."

T.J. stopped the cart to grab Arden by the lapel and yank. "Not in public, jackass!"

"Like anyone would make the connection between one innocent teeny statement and your being a shape-sh—"

"Arden."

His friend had the grace to look embarrassed. Not convincingly, true, but at least he made the effort. "I'll lower my voice if you tell me how that makes sense."

T.J. let go of him. Reluctantly. "If you'd ever woken up with feathers stuck between your teeth, you'd understand."

"Huh." Arden took control of the cart, mounded high with junk food, and pushed it forward. His forehead furrowed. "So you're saying you prefer the all-processed taste of Chik'n instead?"

"God, no." T.J. kicked the cart's squeaky wheel, stuck on a shred of a coupon. "Anyway, what I *was* saying was that it's a Hollywood myth, love changing people. If you even believe in love. A few chemicals swirl around in a guy's brain. He might lie, but he won't honestly become a different person."

"And I was rebutting you. Successfully."

"Random swearing does not a 'successful' comeback make."

"Usually works for me." Arden propped his hip on the cart. "And here all I'd said was 'love makes people stupid.' Interesting response to my normal state of running off at the mouth. Methinks I tapped a hot spot. Share with the rest of the class."

T.J. scrunched his hair, the curly blond-brown mess overdue for a cut forever in his eyes, out of his face and sighed. "Do you remember the tabloid we passed a couple of aisles back? You know, the one left open-faced on top of the toilet paper display?"

Arden snorted. Eloquently. "The one that swore Prince William was an alien?"

"That too. It also had a giant red headline: 'IS YOUR LOVE CHEATING? SIGNS POINT TO YES!' Look at the divorce rates. Look at how many people break up right before Valentine's Day or Christmas to avoid buying a gift. They might have thought they were in love, whatever they decide love might be, but they and the rest of us sorry folk are basically liars, cheats, and bastards who'll do what it takes to get laid and then walk away without regret."

Arden's eyebrow climbed skyward. "Bitter. Nice. Who pissed in your cornflakes this morning? You actually believe that line of crap?"

"Damn right I do, and I challenge anyone to prove me wrong. Jeez, what did someone spill on *this* part of the floor?" T.J. tentatively toed the glutinous off-white goop glued to the linoleum beneath his feet. "Before you say it, Arden, I don't think it's spunk."

"Given how much you like the cock, I'll take your word for it. Which brings me back around to pondering the mystery that is your being a vegetarian *c-a-t*."

"Arden..."

"What? I spelled it."

"If you weren't my closest friend, I'd be obliged to kill you. You *know* I have the..." T.J. lowered his voice, "shifting under control now. I haven't slipped up in almost a year."

"Uh-huh. So that wasn't you purring in your sleep in the passenger seat on the way to the store."

"What? I was not. Was I?"

"I had to fight the urge to hang a bell around your neck and waft some catnip under your nose. It was adorable."

T.J. looked at him. Silently. At length. Then, he moved on.

"I was kidding, you big dork." Arden caught up. "Mr. Jontan wanted pizza rolls." He put his foot on the cart to stop it rolling. "You're a cat. Yeah, yeah, I know, *shhh*. You're neat, clever, sweet when you purr, and you're a sucker for being skritch'd behind your ears. Isn't that love?"

"Nope. Have you ever known a cat to play affectionate with anyone unless they felt like it? Or who didn't walk away as soon as they were bored? I know what I'm talking about."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You're not harshing my mellow, friend. I'm a hound dog all the way, and I'm a believer."

"No, you'll do anything that looks at you sideways and has a pulse. All you do, by existing, is prove my point. And hound dog, my ass. What you really want is a good master with a firm hand and a sack of treats. Admit it."

Arden grumbled under his breath and looked away, pretending to too much interest in a display of pudding cups. "Mistress," he mumbled under his breath. "And no. You're completely wrong. As usual."

"You keep telling yourself that." Scoring a point over Arden made for the highlight of T.J.'s day. He pushed hard and sent the cart squealing forward to the end of the junk-food aisle, aiming for a freestanding display of bite-sized powdered doughnuts. "Who's the king?"

His cart collided with the edge of one approaching at a perpendicular angle and ricocheted into the juice boxes. An *oof* came from whoever had been manning the assaulted cart.

"Fuck. I am so sorry." T.J. jogged to the end of the aisle, ready to blame it all on Arden, who'd probably let him get away with it. What else were friends for? "Are you okay?"

The man behind the cart, rubbing his stomach where the cart had hit him, looked up at T.J. through casual tumbles of hair streaked glossy sepia and ebony. His eyes were as gray as summer storms, and they twinkled. "I think I'll live."

"Mphurgle," T.J. said, caught in the spell of the scent of sand and surf, coconut oil and leather, and something spicy that the man carried with him.

The man's grin broadened. He held out a hand for T.J. to shake, his wrist bedizened with knitted, woven, and small shell bracelets. Small tattoos trailed a line from pulse point to elbow. "MacGowan Smith. Haven't I seen you around somewhere?"

"T.J. Jones." *We haven't met. Trust me, I'd remember you.*

MacGowan's palm and fingers were slim and nimble, hands designed by nature for precision work. Was he a surgeon, a pianist, a painter? There was no way for T.J. not to imagine that agile touch skimming down his chest, his legs, over his hips, kneading his ass...and that was as far as that thought needed to go, or he really would get a boner next to the Freeze-Em Popsicles. That kind of thing was hard to explain away to random strangers, smoking hot or not, especially red-hot-chili "hot."

Lucky for him, MacGowan hadn't yet looked below T.J.'s neck. He snapped his fingers. "The DuBrewer complex. You live there too, right? I saw you and that guy behind you, upstairs from me, when I got my keys."

T.J. replayed that in his head to make sure he'd heard MacGowan right. "You're moving into L-one?" The empty apartment beneath his, ground-floor level, with a front door that opened on the foot of his apartment's staircase. No way. No one got that lucky. Especially not a mostly vegetarian tomcat-slash-man, or the other way around.

"Me and no one else," MacGowan agreed sunnily. He had a sweet West Coast accent, Napa Valley maybe. It added both drawl and lilt to his way of speaking. He eyed T.J. His good cheer softened and warmed around the edges. "I'm glad I was right. I'd hope there's no way I could forget a man like you."

"A guy like what, huh now?"

"I should be all moved in by tonight," MacGowan said. He wheeled his cart around. Chicken. Steak. Pork chops. Sausage. A six-pack of Pacific beer. One lonely zucchini in the middle. "Come by and visit, if you want." He lingered over one last look before he turned to walk away, tipping T.J. a backward wave, shell bracelets clicking quietly. "Anytime you want."

"Put your eyes back in your head and close your mouth before you start catching flies," Arden muttered as he joined T.J. "You look like a constipated parrot."

"Whatever." T.J. stared after MacGowan. "Arden, what just happened here?"

"I'd say you got owned." Arden studied MacGowan's backside. "Huh. Not that I can blame you for drooling. I'd do him."

"You're not even gay."

"My point exactly. So he lives downstairs? How very convenient. Naughty neighbors, I like it." Arden patted T.J. on the back. "This could be interesting. For me, especially. You know I get off on watching, baby."

T.J. shoved Arden halfheartedly. "Put a cork in it." He closed his eyes to better breathe in and appreciate the last traces of MacGowan's scent.

And purred.

He slapped a hand over his mouth while Arden, ever helpful, chortled. He slapped T.J.'s back. "*Told* you that you were purring on the drive in. Well, now. Life's about to get a hell of a lot more interesting around here. Love at first sight is just swishy chemicals, isn't that what you were saying?"

T.J. glared at him. He had a great insult on the tip of his tongue, but blast his luck, all he came out with was: "*Purr.*"

Interesting? Yeah. That'd be one way to put it.

Chapter Two

T.J. thumped the phone book, pages splayed open, in his lap, his mission of ordering pizza forgotten. Again. "What exactly do you think he meant by 'anytime'?"

"Don't know," Arden said. He flicked through three channels without so much as looking at the TV screen. "More to the point, after three hours' worth of you analyzing that conversation to death, I've come to the point where I almost don't care."

"You're a great big steaming pile of help, Arden, you know that?"

Arden flipped him a one-finger salute. "Glad to be of assistance."

"Maybe you want to scratch your balls and fart. Just to complete the image you're working over there."

"Nah, but if you've got a beer, I'm parched."

"Sometimes, I can't exactly believe you're real." The phone book fell when T.J. stood, pages flying and crumpling. He'd long since gotten used to absentminded accidents and stepped over the wreckage. "I've got half a mind to give you a wine cooler."

"If you actually *have* wine coolers, I'll be obliged to geld you, you know." Arden peered up over his auto-channel-surfing. "Just to complete the image you're working over there."

"Children, behave," Mr. Jontan said. It was all he *had* to say. When Mr. Jontan spoke, anyone with even a smidgen of self-preservation shut up and behaved. Usually, he kept it low-key. Though he might have been the most powerful practicing wizard on the East Coast, he didn't brag.

Then again, when a guy had power like Mr. Jontan did, he didn't have to do anything besides treat someone to a long, level look before they decided they had urgent business elsewhere and ran far, far away.

T.J. winced and fell silent. After a moment's consideration in which he bet against himself regarding how big a crater Arden would make when he went *boom*, Arden sighed and mimed zipping his lips.

"Thank you," Mr. Jontan said absently. He licked his finger and flicked another page. In his favorite adopted position when he spent time at T.J.'s, at the kitchen island surrounded by ancient ledgers that smelled like old attics, he looked as alarmingly out of place as the boxes of fruity puff cereal and bananas vying for space.

Arden threw something small and corn-chip-shaped at him. It might actually have been a corn chip. With Arden, it was occasionally hard to be sure of these things. "Forget all the 'love' bullshit. You're just making yourself crazy. You've got a hard-on for him. He's got wood for you. Taking care of it shouldn't be anywhere near this much hassle."

"Hassle?" T.J. shoved his hair out of his face. "What do you know about *hassle*? How about we take a trip down memory lane."

"Oh God," Arden groaned.

"A cat shifter tries to hook up with someone in human shape, things go great, you lose control in the heat of the moment, and you wake up the next morning with catnip stains around your mouth and an empty spot where the guy you took to bed was before he fled in horror. Sometimes he leaves his shoes behind. That's fun. I've got a collection. Thinking about trying my hand at objet d'art, or objet d'sneaker if you will. Or better, the guy's still there, he just can't *breathe* because he's allergic to cats. Nothin' says 'don't call me, and I won't call you' like an asthma attack that won't stop."

Arden looked wholly unimpressed. He golf-clapped. "As rants go, that one's a nine-point-five at least."

"You're not listening."

"D'uh. Seriously, stop it with the pussying around. It gains you nothing. Past bad luck aside, what's the worst that could happen?"

T.J. rubbed the back of his neck. With friends like these, who needed enemies? One wizard, one busybody mundane with a regrettable tendency to learn a little about a lot who needed to have an eye kept on him, and himself, one were-tomcat who'd been on the shape-shifting wagon for months. Just another night in the life.

Arden's abilities to stay silent and pay attention lasted five more seconds than usual. "You were ordering food. Back to work."

"As if. Do it yourself, if you're hungry. I'm not up to the argument over anchovies versus mushrooms."

The low, angry hissing by T.J.'s ankle alerted him to the immediate possibility of his ankles being shredded in five...four...three... A cat the color of midnight rubbed through dust and rolled in a back alley poised its paw, claws extended, over T.J.'s foot. "If you even think about it, Sur Lune, we'll find out if there really is more than one way to skin a cat."

Sur Lune spat at him.

T.J. had had enough one-on-one encounters with Sur Lune since his full-moon accident to interpret across interspecies boundaries. "Who closed all the windows? Psychokitty's stuck in here."

"What, you don't want to spend time with your dearest cuz?" Arden smirked at T.J. over the back of the couch.

"To answer that honestly? No. And he's only my cousin in the loosest sense of the word. No genetics involved."

Sur Lune, bored with human idiocy, launched himself at the door, rocketed off, and circled the room at greyhound speed and Clydesdale volume. Funny how he missed Mr. Jontan every time.

"No genetics except for the ones that make you both meow," Arden pointed out. "Wow, look at him go. Ten bucks says he breaks the door down."

Mr. Jontan clicked his tongue and waved his hand in an abstract sort of way. It might have been taken for swatting a fly, and maybe that was what he'd intended, but the front door swung open regardless.

T.J. chose not to think too hard about the fact that it had been locked. It didn't pay to question Mr. Jontan. "There." He held it open for Sur Lune. He knew stranger things had happened than having a permanent, psychotic houseguest with the temper of a rattlesnake and the questionable sanity of a Tasmanian devil, a man permanently stuck in feline form, but he hadn't yet heard of any. He put up with it. Sur Lune had been a decent guy, once upon a time, and he'd taught T.J. enough of the ropes to cope with being furry every now and then.

Sur Lune bared his teeth at T.J. and undulated past in a sine wave of eau de garbage and malevolent intent. "Don't happen to anyone!" T.J. yelled after him. Not that it'd do much good. Sur Lune got peculiar when the moon waxed gibbous, but... "Is it just me, or does he seem worse this month?"

"And then some. My best guess? He's probably jealous." Apparently tired of waiting, Arden vaulted over the back of the couch like it was the General Lee and slid on sock feet to the fridge. "Better not be imported beer in here. I want something cheap and low-class."

T.J. leaned on the wall by the door, arms crossed, and bit his lip. *Mustn't encourage him by laughing.* Like him, loathe him, or love him, Arden worked his way beneath your skin and stayed there. "Is that what you tell all your dates?"

"When I actually talk to them, yeah." Arden stuck his head in the fridge. "What's that smell, wood-fired pizza?"

"Considering I have one lemon and a six-pack in there, I hope not." T.J. sniffed the air. Huh. He did smell smoke. Rich, woodsy smoke, with a hint of something savory and wild to it. Coming from outside.

Interesting. He waved Arden off. "The six-pack is Budweiser. Go nuts. It's all yours. I'm going to check this out."

He stopped.

"Wait. Jealous of what?"

Arden popped the top off a bottle and tipped it back, drinking at his leisure. He released the longneck with an obscene slurp that might have done something for T.J.'s libido if the thought of Arden naked hadn't made him doubt his ability to have an erection again for the rest of his life. "Jealous of you, dumbass."

"And that would be because..."

Arden pointed at the door, beer in hand. "You've got a nice piece of California Dreamin' down there, as into you as you obviously are into him, and our friend Sur Lune can't aim higher than a bucket of cold water dumped on his head when he feels amorous. What's not to be jealous of?"

Huh. T.J. processed that. He grinned, slowly but brightly. "Put that way...but I still say it's chemicals."

"Save it for the beach boy."

* * * * *

Three feet away from the bottom of the steps leading down, MacGowan sat sprawled across the ground-floor apartment's doormat, toying with what looked like a cat's cradle made of hemp. Five feet away from *him*, T.J. saw the source of the heavy wood-smoke smell, an open clay grill full of pressed mesquite charcoal.

His stomach rumbled. MacGowan looked up. T.J. didn't think he imagined the brightening of MacGowan's mood. "I'd hoped that'd draw you out," he said. "I do an inaugural barbecue whenever I move. There's plenty, if you're interested. Want to join me?"

"I—"

"He's vegetarian!" Arden shouted from inside.

MacGowan winced.

Killing, T.J. decided, was too kind for Arden. He slammed the door shut, blocking out the clamor and roar of the TV. Much better. "Arden. You get used to him, or you move. Not that I'm saying *you* should move." T.J. sat on the steps and put his chin in his hand, fingers curled against his chin. "Can I take that one from the top?"

MacGowan chuckled, a tenor rumbling that warmed T.J. from the inside out. "Be my guest. Do you mind coming down here, though? I'm getting a crick in my neck."

T.J. scooted down on his butt, one step at a time. Halfway down he realized it would have looked a *lot* smoother to stand, but given his usual luck, he might have slipped and tumble-thumped to the bottom. He could roll with this, though. Who knew? It might actually be sexy.

Or not. MacGowan watched him, lips twitching. "Where'd you two meet, clown academy?"

"Ha-ha." Normally, T.J. hated to be teased. Yet from MacGowan, the barbs had no sting. *Interesting-er*. "We were rebellious hellion teens together," he said when he came to rest with his feet planted on the last step. "Arden and I."

"You're too cute to have been a hellion," MacGowan teased. He dropped his cat's cradle and stretched. His loose cotton shirt rode up over his stomach, exposing a bare, suntanned strip of skin.

T.J. might have gotten slightly distracted by the sight. He doubted anyone would have blamed him. Anyone with eyes and a working pulse, anyway.

"I design bracelets and watches, mostly. Small-scale; then if the company I usually sell to likes what I've come up with, they add it to the next season's metrosexual collection."

"Mm-hmm," T.J. agreed, happily zoning out over the sight of MacGowan's artistic hands.

"...do you do for a living?" He tuned back in just in time to hear.

He thought quickly and extrapolated what he hoped had been the right question. "I teach. At the local college. Animal behavior theory. It's more interesting than you'd think."

"You're a teacher?" MacGowan rolled to a sitting position, hands dangling between his knees.

"Not this semester. Luck of the draw, budgets. What was I saying, again?"

"I might have guessed. You look like the brainy type."

In T.J.'s experience, that wasn't usually a compliment. Maybe he'd read MacGowan wrong. Some guys were friendly and open by nature, and his invitation might not have had anything to do with flirting. Honest. "Guilty."

MacGowan brushed a flyaway lock of sepia-sable hair out of his smoky gray eyes, and there was nothing but honesty in them when he said, soft and low, "Good. I have a weak spot for smart men. Especially sexy, smart men."

T.J.'s lips parted. "Oh," was the best he could come up with in the way of witty replies.

MacGowan rolled to his knees and over and somehow ended up on his side, close enough to touch if they both reached out at the same time. "What about you? Beach bums do anything for you? Fair warning, if you don't say yes, I'm gonna feel like an idiot."

"I—" T.J. started. An almighty, unholy screech from his apartment, the sound of a cat meeting a blender with a mallet in hand, made them both jump. He counted to three, all he could manage before the racket made his ears ring. "Sorry. I have to go kill someone. Be right back, okay?"

* * * * *

T.J. went through the door at a run, arm up to shield his head from flying feline attacks. Sounded like Sur Lune was in a mood, and when Sur Lune got moody, things got ugly. "What the hell? Who let him back in?"

"You think anyone has to *let* the bastard in for him to go wherever he pleases?" Though he couldn't see it directly, he heard something noisy and Arden-shaped, shod in mosh-pit boots, thundering past. A whiffing noise followed in its wake.

"Are you trying to catch him with a *fishnet*? It's three-by-six inches! If all you want to catch is his tail, fine, but I'd rather the rest of him was contained with it!" T.J. froze as the black blur that was Sur Lune in full frenzy mode zoomed over his feet. "What's gotten into him?"

"You think anything had to set him off? He's bugnuts batshit crazy twenty-four-seven!" Arden stopped, breathing hard. "I'm done. You want him dealt with, have at it. *Ow*. You little—" Bleeding, Arden raced after him again.

No way was T.J. getting cockblocked for the first time in way too long by a rogue maniac cat. "Mr. Jontan, some help here, maybe?"

Mr. Jontan calmly turned a page, and nothing more. Whether there was anything more to that, T.J. still couldn't tell, but Sur Lune screeched, hung a sharp left, and catapulted toward a window T.J. would have sworn had been both shut and locked, and hurled himself into the night, to become one with the dark and inglorious city.

Finally.

Arden dusted off his sleeves as if the whole thing had been no more of a stress than walking out to get the mail. "If you ask me, I think he's on drugs."

"Yeah? I hope they're painkillers. He'll need them if he interrupts us again." Without Sur Lune to worry about, T.J. was free to close the gap between him and Arden and grab his friend by the lapels. "Screw this up for me, and I will end you."

"What did I do?" Arden protested, the picture of insulted innocence.

"Besides trying to subdue psychokitty with a fishnet? Nothing. Yet. Let's keep it that way."

Arden's wounded expressed metamorphosed into sly glee. "*Nice*. You're already this worked up about everything going well? Tell me, is he as good in real life as he is in your spank bank?"

"For one, you're disgusting. For two—"

"For two, I'm right." Arden smirked. "Look, as a friend would, I'll do what I can. But Tommy-boy, we both know we live in interesting times. Either Lady Luck smiles on you or she doesn't."

"Historically speaking, he's correct," Mr. Jontan said as he scribbled in a Moleskine notebook with a fountain pen.

"That's helpful." T.J. stilled. Holy crap. He'd just smarted off to Mr. Jontan.

Mr. Jontan blinked at him, shrugged, and went back to his books in silence.

T.J.'s heart resumed its normal beating pattern.

Arden touched his forefinger to his tongue, then to T.J.'s shirt, making a hissing sound. "Go on, get out of here and shake it like it's hot."

"Are you going to behave and keep it down to a dull roar up here?"

"Not a chance in hell." Arden spun him about and pushed him forward with a hearty thump on the back. "Go get 'im, boy. No, wait." Arden paused dramatically. "I've been thinking."

That never presaged anything good. T.J. waited by the door, ready in case he needed to flee from whatever Arden was about to say next. When a guy was at risk of permanent mental scarring—and Arden was more than capable of bringing up mental images that no amount of brain bleach would ever remove—he needed to be ready to run. "What?" T.J. asked warily.

Arden, perched on the back of the couch, knitted his fingers and dangled his hands between his knees. Jeez, everything came back to the cock with him, didn't it?

It did. T.J. froze. Uh-oh.

"What's it like?" Arden asked, sincere as the day was long and as sadistic as a Turkish prison guard.

"What's *what* like? Do I really want you to answer that?"

"Probably not," Arden replied cheerfully. "Clarifying: what's, you know—" He jerked his arm a few times and made an orgasm face.

He was so going to regret this. "Are you asking me what gay sex is like?" T.J. asked, disbelieving.

"Well, I was going to say 'gay fucking' but if you're going to be all delicate about it, then sure."

In his breakfast nook-cum-alcove, Mr. Jontan paused in the act of turning a page. Without moving, he infused the air with a sense of listening. *Keenly* listening.

Everyone's a perv in here. Except me. No, strike that, definitely me too. Doesn't mean I want to talk about this. T.J. searched for the right answer, discarded several as too clean for Arden to comprehend, and finally decided on: "Ever been lucky enough to have had back-door sex with a woman?"

Mr. Jontan made a *hmm* noise and went back to his book.

Arden nodded, and then his eyebrows rose. One curiously, then one wickedly. You could tell which was which by the acuteness of the angle. He had alarmingly expressive eyebrows. "Huh. Basically all that's different, then, is an extra dick? Well, that and extra body hair. And testicles. No breasts. Lots more machismo." He started to tick the differences off on his fingers. "Stubble, bigger hands, flat hips, maybe a nice bubble butt if you're lucky—"

T.J. snorted. "For a guy who's supposedly straighter than an arrow, you sure have put a lot of thought into this."

Arden waved absently at him. "I get bored, and you can't blame a guy for being curious, can you?"

"Not usually, but in your case I might make an exception."

Arden ruminated for a moment. "So it's nothing at all like ass sex with a woman, except the ass part. Have I got it right?"

"Sadistic bastard."

"Yes, I am," Arden agreed. He tipped over backward to land on the couch with his feet in the air. He kicked his feet. "I'm not mentioning the *L*-word —"

"Lesbian?"

"Don't toy with me unless you want me to bring up the subject again." Arden cackled when T.J. groaned. "The beach-blanket boy downstairs really turns your crank?"

T.J. ran his hand through his hair. "You want the truth? Yeah. He does."

"Is it that he has a nice ass or what? *Not* that I've been looking."

"Keep your filthy peepers off my —" T.J. gave up.

Arden scoffed. Eloquently. "It's not just sex, is it? You *like* this guy. He's friendly, he's good-natured, and he's an average, everyday kind of dude. His being into you is unexpected gravy. So what are you sticking around here talking to me for?" He pointed his toe toward the door. "Get down there and take advantage of the manbeast, you idiot."

"Thanks for your words of wisdom."

"Anytime, my friend. Anytime." Arden sniffed the air. "Do I smell steak?"

Chapter Three

Arden had a good nose. He had indeed smelled steak, albeit still wrapped and uncooked. Arden swore he was a mundane, and every test Mr. Jontan had tried had confirmed that, but honest to Bast, sometimes T.J. wondered if the guy had some recessive bloodhound genes in him somewhere.

T.J. lingered at the top of the stairs, watching MacGowan at the bottom. MacGowan's forehead was wrinkled in a frown of concentration that couldn't be called anything besides "cute." T.J.'s heart melted still more, not that it wasn't already verging on soft and mushy every time he looked at MacGowan.

On second thought, that was a more disturbing mental image than even Arden could come up with, so he tossed it aside and cleared his throat to get MacGowan's attention. MacGowan looked up, already grinning. The steak he held, at least two inches thick and so wide it spilled over the sides of the hand he poised it in, looked better than sex.

Almost. Nothing really ever looked better than sex.

"Is that a porterhouse in your hand, or are you just happy to see me?" Heat rose in a scalding wave in T.J.'s cheeks. *Nice one. Smooth.* "I mean, uh—"

"Yes to both." MacGowan laughed, and the moment's awkwardness faded away. "I bought two of them. Hoping. You know?"

He'd planned this? T.J. wanted to sit down on the stairs again. Heavily. Then he figured betraying a case of weak-in-the-knees would be worse than blushing or stammering, so what the hell. He started down the stairs, as casual as he could while hanging on to the rail. "Sorry about Arden. His stock in trade and his specialty is being a pain in the ass."

"Don't sweat it. If you ever met the guy I've been friends with longest, trust me, you'd know I'm not bothered. My pal Shavey makes Arden look like an amateur."

"How about I never meet him?" T.J. bit his lip. "I mean, I'm sure he's not that bad."

"Trust me, he is. Don't know what I'd do without him."

T.J.'s tension eased. Being around MacGowan did that to him, somehow. Maybe it was the way he carried himself, as if nothing was too big or too bad to roll right off his broad shoulders. "Listen, about what Arden said earlier..."

"You mean the vegetarian comment?" MacGowan weighed the porterhouse in his hand and wrinkled his nose. "I'd hoped he was trying to pull my chain."

"Sorry." Not that T.J. wasn't tempted. One steak. Just one. He could quit again anytime he wanted.

MacGowan frowned at the fragrant grill. "I could throw some ears of corn on here if you want, as long as I can convince you to join me. Can I?"

"All you had in your cart at the store was one zucchini."

"I could go buy some corn."

God bless him; he actually meant it. T.J. couldn't hold out. "Tell you what. Just one, and it'll be our secret. Deal?"

MacGowan brightened like the sun coming out from behind thick clouds. "You're on." He laid the steak on the grill. The crackling sizzle went straight to T.J.'s stomach by way of his ears, and the heavy, smoky smell of searing beef made his mouth water.

T.J. watched, fondness warming him. He opened his mouth, meaning to say "thank you." What he came out with was: "*Meow*."

Flames rose beneath the steaks. "Whoa!" MacGowan fanned the fire. "Sorry. I'm used to cooking hot dogs on coat hangers over beach bonfires. Hope you like your meat burned."

T.J. had clapped his hand over his mouth.

MacGowan looked across at him, startled. "You okay?"

"*Meow*."

"Say that again?"

T.J. swallowed down a lump in his throat the size of two walnuts—*ow*—and with it, the insistent need to purr. "Nothing. Frog in my throat." *Chip on my shoulder, cat in my soul*. "Beer! We need some brews for a real barbecue, right?" he improvised. "You've got the meat, I've got the grain. Be right back, okay?"

MacGowan shook his head, but looked amused. "Go for it. You know where to find me." He glanced sideways at T.J., his gaze dark and heavy. "And if you don't, then I know where to find you."

T.J. faked a coughing fit to cover his real fit of purrs and beat feet up the stairs, *rapidamente*.

"Back already?" Arden made a big production out of checking his watch. "We've got to work on your stamina, minute man. Was it at least good for you?"

"Quit screwing around," T.J. said curtly as he made for the fridge. "*Hsst.*"

Mr. Jontan closed one book with a thump. Dust billowed out in a gentle wave. He opened another, apparently identical to the first, and dived in.

Arden, on the other hand, drew his ankles up to protect them, like a cartoon housewife. "No way. When did Sur Lune get back in?"

"*Fttt,*" T.J. said. He coughed. "It's not Sur Lune. It's me. Do you hear this? *Meow!*"

To be fair, Arden did try not to laugh. He rubbed his mouth and chin so hard he was in danger of wiping away epidermis as well as his smirk, but at least he made the effort. "Not just a grocery store fluke, huh?"

"*Hiss.*"

"This is a new definition of a guy losing control when he gets all hot and bothered."

"You think?" T.J. jerked open his fridge and rummaged for a pair of imported bottles of beer Arden wouldn't go near with a ten-foot pole, hidden behind the cheap American cans. "He probably thinks I'm nuts."

"I've heard stranger things than meows during sex," Arden said philosophically.

T.J. slammed the fridge shut. "We haven't even gotten to the foreplay yet, and I'm already caterwauling? This never happens when I'm getting fucked!"

Arden covered his ears. "Oversharing!"

"The gentleman doth protest too much," Mr. Jontan murmured. He made a note in his neat ledger. Sometimes, T.J. wondered what Mr. Jontan wrote in there. The rest of the time, he counted himself lucky that he had no idea.

He and Arden waited to see if Mr. Jontan had anything else to contribute. When it seemed unlikely, Arden flipped their third the bird. "Okay, I'm with you. I'm serious. Mostly." He chortled. "Come on. This is priceless."

"Yeah? It's not you down there making an ass of yourself."

"If you were an ass, you'd go *hee-haw* instead. Count yourself lucky. Maybe he likes cats. Of course, I don't think he likes pussy, so you might be out of luck after all."

"Arden..." Beers in hand, T.J. slumped against the wall. "I told you. I'm into him. He can't know the truth about me."

"Seriously?" Arden abandoned his sprawl to sit upright. "You weren't planning on telling the poor guy what you are? Really?"

"As conversation starters on dates or hookups go, 'I'm a cat' doesn't go over as well as you think." Uncomfortable, T.J. scratched the back of his neck. "I just don't want to screw it up with him. If I have to stay in the closet about this, it's not much of a sacrifice to make. As long as he doesn't look at me like I'm a freak."

Arden made a noise in his nose. Not quite a snort, not quite a scoff, not quite sympathy, and it all combined to sound like an aborted sneeze.

"What?"

"Nothing." Arden squinted at him. "Only, seems to me if you're as serious about wanting this to go well as you sound like, then what kind of start is it to a beautiful friendship if you begin by lying through your teeth? Wouldn't that make you just like the sad bastards you were scoffing about just the other day?"

T.J. thinned his lips and said nothing. What *could* be said? This wasn't the same; nowhere near it. "Mind your own business."

"I would if you'd stop tracking your messy affairs all over the rug." Arden subsided back on the couch, sprawled out lazily. "You want my advice, you'll be straight with him. So to speak. But it's your funeral, isn't it? Go eat steak, you fucking lying nonvegetarian, and don't think I'm not getting you back for that later. The amount of tofurkey you've made me eat—"

He could go for hours on a rant like this. Out of the two options, T.J. figured he'd rather risk meowing in front of MacGowan. Or figuring out how not to meow.

Strange, strange, strange. Seriously, MacGowan was great and all, easy on the eyes and sweet and laid-back and just pushy enough to hammer down hard on all of T.J.'s hot buttons, but what was it about him that made T.J.'s inner cat want to come out and play?

* * * * *

Common sense dictated that T.J. should have left well enough alone, maybe made some excuses not to go back and risk blowing his cover with MacGowan, but to be frank about it, when horniness butted heads with common sense, horniness won every time. Maybe stupidity was a by-product of testosterone. T.J. would buy that theory.

However he wanted to slice it, he still ended up jogging down the stairs, glass bottles held high. "Hope you like German beer."

MacGowan chuckled. "I'll try anything once." He did seem like that kind of guy. For a second, nay, a microsecond, T.J. was tempted to do the unthinkable and take Arden's advice. A guy like MacGowan might *be* okay with the esoteric and eldritch.

Or he might think T.J. was insane, or trying to play with *his* head, or just a dick. T.J. swallowed down both irritated growl and doubts, and uncapped one of the beers by tapping it expertly on the staircase railing. He passed it to MacGowan. "Bottoms up."

"I can only hope," MacGowan said, innocent as a lamb, as he tipped the beer back for a curious taste. His lips were soft and pink wrapped around the longneck.

T.J. coughed to hide a whimper. His cock, ready for any excuse, twitched with interest.

MacGowan smacked his sinful lips in contemplative thought. "It's not California, but it's not awful. You have good taste."

T.J. opened his mouth, closed it, then figured, why not? Sauce for the gander was sauce for the gosling, or however that went. "Yeah, I do," T.J. said quietly and made eye contact.

MacGowan's mouth quirked up at one corner. He saluted T.J. with the bottle. "So do I."

Before T.J. could think up a reply, MacGowan poked at the steaks and tried to flip them. Fat and juices splattered his jeans. "Ow! Hope you like yours rare, because the probable outcome here is seared crusty black and still bleeding in the middle."

Sounded perfect to T.J. And to his inner feline. "Suits me fine."

Somewhere, an alley cat warbled out a dire warning. Might have been Sur Lune; might not have been. T.J. reflected that at least he hadn't wanted to purr or meow once during that particular encounter, which left him contentedly free to watch MacGowan move, the sturdy strength of his thighs and the tight flexing of his ass while he juggled turning steaks with sipping beer.

Maybe this could work out. He'd keep his fingers crossed. After years of star-crossed hookups, he was due a stroke of good fortune, right? Right.

He hoped.

* * * * *

"No, no, let me." MacGowan sliced off a curl of what had started off as a porterhouse and ended up more like rare prime rib. He had smudges of soot on his face, smelled strongly of smoke, and one lock of hair had charred off. And through all of it, his good cheer never even considered dissipating. He speared the meat and held it out to T.J. poised on the tip of a fork.

T.J. clenched his fists. He would not purr. He would not. What the *hell*? "I can feed myself, you know."

"Where's the fun in that?" MacGowan prodded his lips with the forkful of meat. T.J. could feel the blush rising again as the mental associations clicked into place. He'd bet good money MacGowan was doing that on purpose.

He couldn't really find it in himself to mind. Still, to spare his dignity in case he was wrong—it happened—he opened for MacGowan's offering and drew the morsel of steak off between his teeth.

At the first burst of flavor, T.J. thought he'd orgasm. The last meat he'd tasted as a man had been drive-through burgers. This, *this*...savory and salty with a touch of garlic and peppercorn, juicy, the flavors washing through his mouth. He didn't want to stop chewing and make the taste go away. He wanted to suck on the meat and roll it over his tongue.

Then again, he didn't want to make love to it, jeez. T.J. coughed, chewed quickly, and swallowed. He peeked at MacGowan. If MacGowan had been watching him fellate

rather than masticate his porterhouse, he might start looking for a nice big hole in the ground to jump in and bury himself.

Or maybe he didn't have to worry about that. Was MacGowan flushed, or was it the reflection from the dying coals in the grill and the streetlight far enough away to obscure expressions? He shot a questioning look at MacGowan, who shook his head. "You have no idea what you look like, do you?"

"Uh..." T.J.'s brain stalled. "No?"

"I didn't figure you would." MacGowan tilted to the left and studied T.J. There was something of the predator suddenly in his mien that made T.J.'s nerves tingle and the cat all too close to the surface—*again*—rear up with claws sheathed and purr rumbling. "You've got something," MacGowan said, thumbing his own lip. "Right here. Let me get it."

"Mmph?" T.J. sat still and watched, transfixed, MacGowan's hand approaching. He shut his eyes and moaned under his breath when MacGowan's warm touch brushed over his lip and lingered a beat too long to be less than wiping off some schmutz. Then, for good measure and just in case T.J. didn't get the point—which he did; dear God, did he ever—he thumbled T.J.'s lip.

T.J. couldn't help it. Eyes still closed, he let his lips fall open and drew MacGowan's thumb between his teeth and sucked. MacGowan hissed, and maybe another time, another place, T.J. would have dropped him like he was a live coal and jumped back, stumbling over an apology and cracking wise to cover the awkwardness. Not now, when he had the taste of MacGowan heavy on his tongue. He tasted of fire and meat, dark and tempting.

He sucked MacGowan's thumb, nursed it, and didn't let go.

"God," MacGowan breathed. "Guess I don't have to wonder if you're feeling the chemistry too, do I?"

T.J. hummed around MacGowan's thumb and pushed it out with his tongue. Not at all done, he caught MacGowan's unresisting arm by the wrist and curled his tongue around MacGowan's pointer finger. He lashed it with his tongue, stroked it, and drew it inside to suck.

"Seriously don't have to wonder," MacGowan said hoarsely. He wrapped his other hand around T.J.'s nape. "Would you believe me if I said I honestly didn't plan for more than a barbecue and getting to know you?"

T.J. shrugged. His mouth was full.

MacGowan's laugh surprised him. "Hey, that tickles!" He stroked the roof of T.J.'s mouth. "You've got a tongue like sandpaper."

T.J. spat MacGowan's finger out. Fast. He clapped his hand over his mouth and stared at MacGowan while gibberish scrawled itself over the inside his head, mostly words that would have had to be spelled with asterisks in the funny pages.

MacGowan stroked his lip with his finger still shiny with saliva. T.J. shuddered, wanting to let him back in, but a quick poke told him his canines were lengthening and sharpening into feline fangs. "What's wrong?" MacGowan asked, simmering desire softening to concern. "T.J.?"

If he concentrated on his breathing, on finding his inner center and his Zen, maybe he could pull this off. T.J. took one deep breath, then two, then three –

MacGowan stopped poking him. "Uh, T.J...."

T.J. refused to clap his hand to his ears to see if they'd gone pointed and furry. "What?" he mumbled through his clenched jaw.

MacGowan pointed up. "I think we have company."

Huh, what now? T.J. looked up, directly into Mr. Jontan's contemplative assessment of them. He hung over the balcony and studied him with the clear and remorseless lack of shame of the true scholar. "Fascinating," he said in his quiet, mad-scientist way.

"Mr. Jontan," T.J. growled.

"I wasn't talking about you." Mr. Jontan turned smoothly to treat MacGowan to an equally disturbing dissection of a stare. "There's something familiar about this."

MacGowan looked at T.J. for an explanation T.J. couldn't give, and raised his hands palms up. "Have we met before?"

"Never," Mr. Jontan said. "Yet there's something about you I can't quite place. I'd very much like to ask –"

Arden's arms locked around Mr. Jontan's waist. Saved by the PITA. "No one likes a backseat voyeur," he chided. "Back inside to your books, brain trust."

Now that took balls. Arden lifted his chin at T.J. over Mr. Jontan's shoulder and mouthed, *You owe me one.*

When they'd disappeared, the mood hadn't fully gone with it. T.J. licked his lips and found his tongue smooth and sleek, fully human. Relief made him stupid. "So where were we?"

MacGowan slid closer, smoldering once more. He took a licking and kept on ticking, didn't he? *Ahahah.* He stroked T.J.'s cheek, thumbed his lip, and then turned the tables neatly when he caught T.J.'s hand and lifted it to his own face. He delicately applied the point of his tongue to the tender flesh between finger and finger where they met T.J.'s hand. "I think we were right about here," he said, his voice pure liquid sex. "Or we could be inside my place in ten seconds. Quiet, private, no interruptions. What do you think?"

"I think we wasted ten seconds talking about it when we could have already been on the move. Let me just tell the guys poker night's over and kick them out."

"Whatever it takes." MacGowan flicked the tip of his tongue along T.J.'s thumb. "Don't keep me waiting long."

* * * * *

Upon T.J.'s entry into the apartment, he found everything as spotlessly normal as an average Joe's bachelor pad on a weekend night with the guys. Sort of. If one of those guys was a bibliophile who carried his library on his back like a snail, and the other lay sprawled out on the couch pretending to watch a documentary on the savanna while he radiated pure and virtuous innocence.

"Your halo's crooked," he told Arden. "Blame the horns. Pass me the remote, would you?"

Arden dug beneath the couch cushions and winged the black plastic rectangle at him. "You've got to be kidding me. You're choosing TV over a hookup?"

"Nope." T.J. aimed and fired at the TV. Modern technology. Now that was magic. "Other way around. Time for you guys to go home."

"Mmm," Mr. Jontan said. He squinted at a page.

Arden scoffed. "Like hell we are. There's a *Miami Ink* marathon coming on in ten minutes."

"You have a TV of your own, which, as luck would have it, is in your own apartment." T.J. clapped his hands. "Everybody, move it!"

Mr. Jontan carefully selected a new pen from a box of seemingly identical pens and squinted at the nib. Arden leered. "What's the matter? You don't want us in hearing range of you squealing like a pig?"

T.J. was, for a moment, speechless. "Pigs? Jesus, Arden. Pot, kettle, *whack*. Out!"

"Well! You don't have to tell me twice." Arden rolled his eyes and heaved himself off the couch. Like a beanpole or maybe a scarecrow, he stretched up, shook all his limbs, and donned the baseball cap he carried stuffed in his back pocket. "Who am I to stand in the way? Only a guy who's known you for half of forever, who's stayed up into the wee small hours helping you when you needed a hand, who once rescued you from a pack of junkyard dogs—"

"It was a *teacup poodle*, and I was about to show him what a bad idea it was to yap at someone in a grouchy mood before you swooped in trying to impress Carole Donnelly." T.J. speared his hand through his hair and dragged it off his forehead. "You don't want to leave? Fine. Take your time, enjoy the free cable. Graffiti the walls. Raid the fridge, whatever, have at it. But for the love of God, *don't interrupt me* anymore. Please."

"I'm only looking out for your best interests." Arden sobered momentarily. "Look, all teasing aside, he seems to be a nice kid and so on, but Mr. Jontan's got his radar lit up and that makes me uneasy. What do we really know about him?"

"There's something familiar about him," Mr. Jontan said, stroking his chin and accidentally smudging ink over his cheek. "Fascinating."

T.J. hesitated.

Arden shrugged, embarrassed and not particularly graceful about it. "I don't know what Jontan means by that, but if he's 'fascinated,' then I'm not at my ease

anymore. We know fuck-all about MacGowan-boy, and forgive me for pointing it out, friend, but you've got a few Achilles' heels that make your hookups a bit more dangerous than the norm without a proper vetting."

"He's not a bad guy. He's as ordinary as they come."

"That's what people who don't know me would say about yours truly."

"No, they'd say, 'He's coming, he's coming! Lock up the women and children.'" T.J. shrugged off an unpleasant tingling sensation that suggested Arden had an actual point, and not a bad one. "Go. I'll be fine."

Arden considered that and thumped down on the couch. "Think not. After all, you were saying something about your control getting a little..." He wagged his hand. "If you end up growing whiskers, you'll be glad there's someone here to haul your ass out of the fire."

T.J. gritted his teeth.

"You would do well to wait until I've finished my studies," Mr. Jontan said without looking up from Tome VII, Volume X, Subsection XXIII of whatever had him so absorbed.

That was what they called the last straw. "Nope," T.J. retorted. "See you guys later. I'm fine. Everything's *fine*. You'll see."

"Famous last words!" Arden shouted after him.

The cool night air lessened the annoyed heat in T.J.'s face and washed over him in soothing waves that eased the tension he carried in his muscles. He rolled his shoulders to work out the kinks, popped his neck, and took the stairs at a jog with the theme to *Rocky* playing in his head.

Halfway down, the pollen off the pine trees hit him via a hearty cross-breeze. He sneezed. Lost his balance. Fell.

Ended up landing on four paws, his clothes smothering him in a heavy, barbecue-smoke-scented blanket.

Feline instinct took over. T.J. yowled, screeched, and fought his way out of his clothes. Once free he stood with four sets of claws hooked into his henley and jeans like burrs on Velcro and panted.

Okay...that's not good.

Chapter Four

T.J. scrambled about to stare up the stairs at the innocently closed door to his apartment. All was quiet up there. Too quiet. *For fuck's sake, don't tell me they did this.* It'd be like Arden, for the sake of proving his point, only he didn't have any of the juice it'd take, whereas Mr. Jontan did, but T.J. doubted he'd be bothered leaving his research for anything short of an earthquake and maybe not even then. *How then? Who? Why?*

Below him, coming from the ground-floor apartment, T.J. heard the unmistakable sound of tumblers clicking. Alarm in a cat body translated to yowling and bolting; as fate and luck would have it, he tumbled *down* instead of up and landed sprawled in a position that only lacked an LOLcats caption to complete the humiliation, right in time for MacGowan to open his door and to miss his bare California-tanned feet by inches.

"Whoa!" MacGowan jumped a step back.

T.J. hunkered down and made himself as small as he could. His tail switched to and fro, the cat's instincts insistent on getting the hell out of Dodge. Human instincts, on the other hand, kept him frozen in place.

Before he could choose between the two, MacGowan blinked at him. He smiled, softer than before, warm with pleasure. "Hey, buddy," he crooned as he dropped to a crouch. He held out two nimble fingers for T.J. to sniff. "Aren't you a pretty girl?"

T.J.'s hair bristled. He hissed and spat—realized what he was doing—and mewed.

MacGowan didn't seem in the least bit fazed. "Easy, buddy, easy. I'm not going to hurt you. Puss-puss-puss."

Felines weren't able to roll their eyes or groan, or T.J. would have been tempted. A greeting like that from anyone else, and he'd have showed them his tail and bolted. But run from MacGowan...he couldn't. Wouldn't. Hard to tell the difference between the two. The human half of his brain shook hands with the feline half, coming together over

a common interest, and without his body's permission, rolled T.J. over to expose his furry belly.

Right about now, he thought, is where we find out if a guy really can die of embarrassment. Or so he thought. He'd been premature, as in the next moment MacGowan crooned to him like a kitten and rubbed his stomach. And T.J. purred, a rich, joyous rumble at top volume.

"Pretty girl," MacGowan murmured as he stroked T.J. *just right* and scratched behind his ears.

There was a point of no return, and T.J. had reached it. Body took over completely and reduced him to a purring, writhing bundle of cat happiness.

"Who do you belong to, hmm?" MacGowan tweaked T.J.'s tail. There was an art to that, and if done wrong would have broken the spell. He did it exactly right. If he were a cartoon character, T.J. would have had hearts in his eyes. Rotten double nature. "I don't see a collar." He stopped scratching the itchy spots T.J. couldn't reach and studied him. "Don't scratch me, buddy, okay?"

T.J. stopped. That didn't bode well. The next second, he *knew* it'd boded ill when MacGowan scooped him up and cradled him close. The world blurred past him while MacGowan carried him inside the apartment and shut the door behind him, his route of escape firmly cut off.

"Can't let a lovely lady like you run around on her own out there. It's dangerous," MacGowan explained. He eased T.J. down on a couch so soft that it begged to be kneaded and curled up on. "I've got someone coming over in a few minutes. Maybe they'll know who you belong to. For now you stay put, pretty girl."

Some things transcended the boundaries between man and cat, specifically *man*. T.J. bared his teeth and turned his back to MacGowan and flipped his tail up. In the long run it probably didn't matter, but by damn, it was satisfying to hear MacGowan mutter, "Oops."

A warbling trill issued from somewhere in the manifold pockets of MacGowan's cargo jeans. T.J.'s ears flattened. If MacGowan had a bird somewhere on his person, he could just envision the carnage sure to ensue. There was only so much a cat could take, and his nerves were already on a razor edge.

"Take it easy, big guy." MacGowan scratched behind T.J.'s ears. At least he had the gender right this time. "You've never heard a cell phone before, have you? Huh. Wonder if you *do* belong to anyone."

The phone warbled louder, insistent. MacGowan smoothed his hand down T.J.'s back. "Don't freak out when you hear me talking to no one. That's Shavey's ringtone, and trust me, it'll be worse if I don't answer. He reminds me of a guy I met tonight."

One of T.J.'s ears swiveled forward. Out of the three options MacGowan had to choose from, if MacGowan was talking about him—

MacGowan fished a blocky, retro-styled phone out of his midcalf pocket—who the hell kept their phone there?—and hit a series of buttons.

"About fucking time," a crisp, all-business drill sergeant's voice barked.

Speakerphone. Great. Or maybe not too bad. With a bozo like that yammering away, it'd be easier to sneak out while MacGowan was distracted, and come hell or high water T.J. *was* getting out of there. He hoped. When he tried to hop off the couch and zip around behind to put it between MacGowan's presence and himself, the result was less success than it was abject failure. To be exact, he couldn't move.

He whipped his tail up to cover his nose and stared at MacGowan, who plunked his phone atop a teetering tower of boxes. "I saw you less than three days ago, joker. Missing me already?" MacGowan asked.

"More like I'm missing my original vinyl Pink Floyd I know was in the rack where it belonged the last time I saw you," Shavey retorted. "Gee, let me think. Wonder where it could have gone?"

MacGowan tipped his head back and laughed, an impish, gleeful chortle.

Shavey swore like a professional sailor. "Not funny, asshole. That album had better be in an overnight express mailbox before I hang up the phone."

"Payback is sweet," MacGowan said. "Hang on." He crouched before the couch and tickled beneath T.J.'s chin. "Buddy, it's okay. You can get down and wander around if you want."

The inflexible hold keeping T.J. pinned to the spot lifted away like clouds that hid the moon. He even breathed easier. Not that that did a thing to settle his alarm. He had the uncomfortable feeling that if MacGowan had told him to do a backflip, the next thing he knew he'd have been ass over teakettle and doing cartwheels using his tail as a fulcrum.

Something was *so* not right here. T.J. seethed and switched said tail to and fro. Whether it was worse for Arden to have been right or for his morphic switch to have locked on to MacGowan's every word, he almost wasn't sure.

He jumped off the couch and zipped behind the corner, where he stopped to peer out at MacGowan wandering through a maze of packing boxes and loose paraphernalia strewn about from the ones that had burst open at the corners or been rifled through, still talking to this Shavey clown. "Like you didn't replace my Billy Joel with Linda Ronstadt at that Malibu party," he said, wandering toward the kitchen.

T.J. saw the imminent disaster before MacGowan did. He'd unpacked and laid out an impressive array of cords, chunky beads, wires and tools, and as happened when moving house, had forgotten where he'd left his mess. He was heading straight for it, sure to trip and fall down and possibly break his crown.

Not on my watch. Unfortunately, his cat body insisted on hunkering down and wiggling preparatory for a pounce. It cost him precious seconds in which MacGowan came three steps closer to catastrophe.

He'd made it half of one bound forward when he saw, a microsecond before MacGowan caught his toes on the wires, said wires straightening themselves out to lie smooth and flat.

T.J.'s pounce aborted midflight and sent him sprawling instead, chin to the carpet. The ungraceful landing put him at perfect eye level with the cords, which furled and snarled back into a tangled knot as soon as MacGowan stepped free of them. MacGowan yakked on, trading insults with Shavey, who sounded like a hell of a lot of fun to wind up, and as far as T.J. could tell hadn't noticed a thing out of the ordinary.

What. The. Hell?

T.J. stayed exactly where he was behind the couch and stared at MacGowan in stunned fascination. It wasn't just the tangle of beads and thongs that moved on their own to smooth MacGowan's way as he meandered around his cluttered familiar room without paying a whit of attention to anyone except Shavey. The conversation itself he tuned out. Sounded to T.J. exactly like him and Arden bickering, minus Arden's insouciance and plus a metric half ton of irate sternness.

He kept his focus instead on the increasing weirdness of how everything seemed to move around to accommodate MacGowan and keep him safe. When he leaned on one elbow to support his full weight on a towering, teetering stack of boxes with DISHES scrawled across the side in Sharpie, they *should* have fallen with an almighty crash. Did they? Nope. They made like the Leaning Tower of Pisa and stayed put. A spider crawled in figure eights out of the way of MacGowan's feet, and T.J. knew the spiders around this apartment building, especially the ones that lived in the laundry room, out of order for so long it was as good as abandoned. Vicious suckers who lived for the opportunity to bite.

"Okay, okay, don't have a heart attack. I'll give you the album when I see you tomorrow." MacGowan dropped his phone on the couch and studied the innumerable boxes, 75 percent of them without labels. He clicked his tongue and tapped his foot, then went straight for an unremarkable carton in the middle of a stack, opened it, and drew out an impressively pristine record. Impressive mostly because it'd been stuffed in with loose knives and forks and an eggbeater.

T.J. retreated, haunches first, a few inches farther behind the couch. His fur stood on end as it was, but when he trod on something that squeaked and chomped on his tail, he yowled and corkscrewed about, ready to pounce-chomp-shred-spindle-fold-and-mutilate whatever had pushed him that tiny inch too far into madness.

He came eye to eye with something three inches tall, bipedal, brown as a walnut, and wild-haired, a rogue dust bunny clutched in its hands. It chattered at him at a pitch only animals could hear, yanked his whiskers, and disappeared in a blur of speed.

Right, that was it. T.J. was leaving *now*.

Or not. MacGowan was suddenly behind him, sitting tailor-style on the floor and stroking him idly. "I made the right move," he told Shavey, the phone balanced on his knee. "This place feels right."

"Feels' right?" Shavey asked, skeptical. "You've been there less than a day."

"C'mon, man. You know when I get a hunch it usually works out for the best."

"There's your key word. 'Usually.'" This guy was good with the sarcasm. Jesus God, if anyone ever put Shavey and Arden together in one room the explosion would wipe half this city off the map, wouldn't it?

"A change of scenery was the right choice for me," MacGowan said with a confident assurance that shut even Shavey up. "The apartment already feels like home. Welcoming. I found a cat, really friendly, and if he doesn't belong to anyone, I'm keeping him. And there's an upstairs neighbor who—"

Shavey's groan cut MacGowan off. "Not this again. When are you going to learn?"

T.J. perked his ears forward. If cats could frown, he would have. What did Shavey mean?

"It's different this time," MacGowan said patiently, though he scratched a tad too hard behind T.J.'s ears as he did and his thigh muscles tensed.

"MacGowan..." Shavey emitted a noise halfway between a growl and a sigh. "I'm just trying to look out for you. You fall in love way too easily, and every time the guy turns out to be an asshole who's hiding something. Remember the married man? The con artist? The cornfield guy? The shoe fetishist?"

"This guy—T.J.—he's different. Trust me." MacGowan shook off his irritation with a small effort and replaced it with the casual good cheer that suited him best. "I'm a big boy, Shavey. I know what I'm doing." To T.J., he murmured, "That's right, isn't it, Buddy?"

Buddy. It had the ring of a name that was going to stick, didn't it? T.J. tucked his paws under himself and grumbled.

MacGowan didn't hear that or ignored it or possibly both. "See you tomorrow morning, Shavey."

"You'd better have my album with you, unscratched, undamaged, or I'm taking it out of your hide."

"It's as virgin as a statue of Mary," MacGowan promised. "See you soon." He ended his call and applied himself to teasing T.J.'s tail. "Some kind of guy, huh?" He chuckled and eased the firmness of his petting. "Tell you what. There's someone I want you to meet. It's probably taking him a while to send his company on their way, but when he comes down to visit, I bet you'll like him."

T.J. would have covered his face with his paws if he could have. Given everything else batshit crazy going on, he'd almost forgotten. *That's just...peachy. Now what do I do?*

Chapter Five

MacGowan stood and stretched his arms over his head in a mighty yawn. "Might as well take a shower before T.J. gets here. Think you'll be okay out here by yourself?"

This had potential. T.J. purred and, resigning the rest of his dignity to the trash can, chirruped for good measure.

"That's my Buddy. You like it here, don't you? Hmm?" MacGowan tickled his ruff. "If T.J.'s as cool with this mess as you are...he's a nice guy. I meant what I said to Shavey. What do you think, Buddy? What do you figure he thinks about me?" He chuckled. "Listen to me, talking to a cat. I don't know, though, you seem smart. What's the verdict, Buddy?"

Inside "Buddy's" head, T.J.-the-human thought, *Objects in your apartment move on their own, you have a friend who's possibly more of a douche than mine is, and I think you have a slight brownie infestation in the carpets. I still want you enough to swim through broken glass on my belly, except I'm not into bestiality and I seem to be stuck.*

So far, not one of his better nights. Time to hightail it, and unless he was mistaken he thought one of the front windows was open a crack...

* * * * *

"You know, there are parts of you I never want to see, yet you insist on showing them to me." Arden winged a T-shirt at T.J.'s head.

He shrugged it on. Too tight over the shoulders and boasting a faded Green Day logo, but it'd do. "Wait. Is this yours? Never mind, I don't care." He peered at himself in the mirror. Still human? Yep. "What's going on, Mr. Jontan?" he yelled over his shoulder.

A dry flip of pages answered him. "One moment," Mr. Jontan said, as abstracted and far away as if he'd heard and received the message somewhere around Mars.

Arden hooted, highly entertained. T.J. was glad *one* of them was. "So you were what, halfway up the stairs, when you—"

"Changed back." T.J. rubbed his jaw, making sure what he saw matched what he felt. Stubble, no whiskers. So far so good.

"Right about the spot where you turned into a pussy in the first place then."

T.J. glared at him in the mirror. "Keep it up, smart-ass. Keep it up."

"Or what, you'll give me a good scratch the next time we meet? Please." Arden crossed his arms and leaned on the door frame. "Believe me or not, I'm only trying to figure this out before we lose the paddle sailing up this river of—wait, I've got it. MacGowan's to blame. Told you he was risky."

T.J. pushed past him. "It's got nothing to do MacGowan. Talk to me, Mr. Jontan!"

"Bull plus shit," Arden scoffed as he followed on T.J.'s heels. "Mr. Jontan, tell him he's off his rocker if he believes that, would you? Either that or sell him a bridge in Brooklyn and split the profits with me."

Mr. Jontan carefully marked his place with one finger and looked up at T.J. and Arden. As usual, it brought both to a screeching halt. The quiet intensity of his gaze probably would have made an A-bomb hold its breath. "Arden's right. You're wrong."

Though despite his denial T.J. had been expecting this, it still hit with the force of a donkey's kick to the gut. "Are you sure?"

Mr. Jontan didn't blink. He rarely blinked. It was one of his scarier attributes. T.J. had seen him go nearly three minutes once, at the end of which time he'd been ready to claw his own eyes out and dunk them in Visine. "Yes," he said, level as a lake on a windless day. "Come here."

T.J. came. Or went. Whichever. Mr. Jontan held up a neatly sketched diagram for him to examine. "This is your friend. Do you recognize him?"

T.J. hesitated. "Uh..."

Arden wasn't bothered by the need to be polite; for once, it wasn't his ass on the gridiron. "Looks like one of those Magic Eye pictures," he said baldly. "You're telling us the beach boy down there isn't a man, but a series of dots? That explains a lot."

T.J. stepped on Arden's toes and bore down. "Let me get a closer look?" He took the page from Mr. Jontan and turned it this way and that. The drawing made his head ache to look at, and it definitely wasn't a recognizable portrait or anything animal, vegetable, or mineral, but he'd swear—he'd almost swear—what he saw in those dots was somehow familiar. "What is this?"

Mr. Jontan tented his fingers beneath his chin, still not blinking. "It's raw magic. In feline form, you would have sensed and been better able to comprehend MacGowan's underlying nature."

"Of a bunch of dots?" Arden asked.

"But I didn't—" T.J. started. Then stopped. He hadn't seen them, no, but the *sense* of them was so hauntingly familiar that he doubted his conscious memories. His

subconscious knew exactly what they were. He still asked the question, hoping this didn't mean what he thought it meant. "What's raw magic?"

"Dangerous," Mr. Jontan said, returning to his studies. "Your friend is not a wizard, but he has the potential to be. It's probable he doesn't even know. Such evidence of talent generally surfaces in the prepubescent."

"So he's either old for it or clueless," Arden butted in.

"In my opinion, it's both," Mr. Jontan agreed. "That's why I didn't see it myself at first." He cleared his throat. Mr. Jontan, with the wool almost pulled over his eyes. It was a Kodak moment, or would have been if T.J. hadn't been otherwise distracted by being up to his neck in alligators.

Mr. Jontan went on. "The brownies were the giveaway. They tend to follow in the wake of those touched by magic whom they both like and who attract them with a certain sense of chaos."

T.J. thought back to the explosion of clutter in MacGowan's apartment. He couldn't disagree with the *chaos* part, not without getting struck down by lightning for being a liar. "And?"

"I doubt you'll see them again unless they want you to. The brownies."

"That's not what I was asking." T.J. wavered. "What are you really saying here, Mr. Jontan?"

"I thought that would have been obvious." Mr. Jontan reached for a book. "He is the possessor of unconscious magics. You, shape-shifting cat, quickly out of control in his presence, are therefore obviously a creature easily consumed by chaos. It's a bit like air hockey. Certain magics zig, zag, and collide, as it were."

"And that's why I can't control myself? Perfect." T.J. tried to dig his fingernails into the molding and succeeded only in scratching up a few flakes of off-white paint. "Can you fix it?"

"That's not quite all of it, but no, I can't. There's nothing to fix," Mr. Jontan said. "Now that you know, your control may be better as long as you concentrate. Or we may be completely wrong. The situation has no recent precedent, and each man is as different in his way as falling leaves. Anything can happen once, twice, always, or never at all. Be prepared for that which you cannot prepare for."

Arden, ever one to get straight to the bottom line, whistled under his breath. "Cockblocked by yourself. Now that bites a big, hairy one."

To that, T.J. could only agree. Not that common sense was going to stop him. He'd already gone too far for that. He burned to return to MacGowan, and he'd make it there come hell or high water.

Too bad that both were probable on a night like this.

* * * * *

T.J. stood subdued by his door, head down while Mr. Jontan lumbered past bowed down by the weight of books and Arden strolled by, hands in his pockets.

When Mr. Jontan was far enough down the steps not to hear Arden's sotto voce whisper, he laid his hand on T.J.'s arm and squeezed firmly enough to indicate he was about to make a point. "Tell Mr. Jontan what I've just told you and going furry at the worst moments will be the smallest of your problems, get it?"

T.J. tried to tug his arm free. Christ, but Arden was strong for such a skinny guy. Maybe it wasn't a recessive hound dog gene he had, but something along the troll or ogre line. "You haven't said anything yet."

"I didn't? Oh, right. Make it easy on the both of you. Tell him what you are. Get it out of the way now. Work on familiarizing him" – Arden waggled his eyebrows – "with the truth, and then move on, get married, ask me to be your best man, raise some rainbow-colored rug rats –"

T.J. managed to jerk free of Arden the second time around. "Why *are* we friends, again?"

"Mostly 'cause I'm too adorable to be resisted." Arden smirked. "Just do it, T.J. Be straight with him, though not too straight or your sex life's dead before it starts, and then you'll know, won't you? If he can't handle you as you are, then best to know now, before you've gone and lost your heart."

T.J.'s brain stalled. Arden stifled a barking laugh. "No. No way, not you. Are you falling *in love* with him?"

Unable to think of anything that wasn't a lie, T.J. rubbed the back of his neck, glared at Arden, and kept his mouth shut.

Arden poked him in the ribs. "Forget everything I said. All I want to do is settle in and enjoy the show. Just remember who you can come crying to when everything goes to hell in a handbasket, okay?"

Annoyed, T.J. batted Arden's hand away. "It won't. I've got it under control."

"Control. Isn't that the whole problem?" Arden wheeled away, saluting backward at T.J. "Good luck, kid." He drew up short. "Hello there, *MacGowan*. Good to see you again. It's been ages; how have you been? Terrific. How long have you been out here listening to us?"

T.J. barely heard most of that. He'd caught MacGowan's scent as soon as his name was spoken, and if he'd caught anything Arden had been babbling about –

"Doesn't matter anyhow," Arden said, as airy as dandelion seeds and about as clever. "We're rehearsing for a play. Have fun, kids." He vaulted past T.J. and made tracks, his long stride eating up the distance between him and the patiently trudging Mr. Jontan.

Chicken. T.J. glowered after him, then, though his palms were sweaty and his throat dry, looked down at MacGowan. MacGowan, a compact package of sun, sand, and easy-breezing, tousled, shower-damp hair tied in a casual queue that dripped water

down his shirt and made the thin cotton cling to his chest. The eye naturally followed the track of the water to MacGowan's waist, and lower.

Everything he'd meant to say, for good or for ill, evaporated off the tip of T.J.'s tongue. He swallowed a painful lump and opened his mouth uselessly.

Standing below him and looking up, MacGowan bit his lip. T.J. wasn't a mind reader, but in that second he *knew* what was going through MacGowan's head, all of it sounding like Arden and laced with nasty-tasting second thoughts. It was a defining moment, the kind where everything could either go tits up or trousers down, and God help him if he knew one way or the other which way the scales would tip.

It'd depend on who made the first move, he thought. And how well they played it. T.J. gathered his thoughts and started to speak –

A warbling, steam-kettle-hissing snarl rent the air asunder. A black flash with crazed red eyes zoomed past MacGowan at warp speed, stopping only to sink in his teeth. MacGowan yelped and buckled to grab at his foot.

At the very edge of the shadows, Sur Lune stopped to switch his tail, and if a cat could snigger, he would have. Then he was gone. T.J. barely noticed, already taking the steps three at a time with nothing more on his mind than getting to MacGowan.

"Did he hurt you?" he asked when he hit bottom.

"I think he bit me." MacGowan winced out loud.

"Let me see. Wait, no." T.J. offered MacGowan his shoulder to lean on. "Parking lot's disgusting. Get inside where I can take a look. I—" *I'm still human.* He stopped, almost overbalancing the both of them. *Holy Christ. I made it down the steps still human. What next, rains of toads?* T.J. shuddered to think.

MacGowan rested his weight on T.J.'s shoulder. His half-dry hair tickled T.J.'s cheeks, and the smell of soap and cologne and man filled his nose. "Glad you're here," MacGowan said, testing his weight. He glanced sideways at T.J. and smiled. "In more ways than one. Hey, do you think your friend will come back around tonight?"

"Knowing him? Definitely. With binoculars."

The curve of MacGowan's lips was positively evil. "Then how about we leave the steaks here to distract him, and go inside for 'dessert'?"

T.J. considered that for approximately one hot second. "Just one question."

"What?"

"What are we still standing around *here* for?"

Chapter Six

"It's not that bad, I swear." MacGowan leaned gamely on T.J.'s shoulder and let him lead them in an awkward stumbling hobble toward the bathroom.

"Sur Lune bit you. It's not going to be *good*," he pointed out. "At least let me take a look."

"If it keeps you happy," MacGowan said, amiable as an ice-cream truck. "But it doesn't even hurt."

"You're dripping *blood*."

"It's a flesh wound," MacGowan said in a truly terrible British accent.

T.J. stopped to glare at him. It made for an interesting perspective standing nearly nose to nose. Also a distracting one. Combined, they might have made for his lack of tongue-tiedness when he said, "Do you have a problem with my being alone with you in your apartment at night?"

"I didn't say that. I have you right where I want you, handsome." MacGowan grinned loopily and bumped foreheads with T.J. Ow. Guy had a noggin like a battering ram, though odds were good that'd been meant to be a love nudge. The reverberations lingered, though, and T.J.'s ears tingled, as if they were...changing shape...

He shook his hair forward, prayed MacGowan wouldn't notice, and hoisted him unresistingly forward. "Your bathroom's in the back to the left, isn't it?"

"Yeah." MacGowan stopped. "How'd you know?"

Crap. "All the apartments are laid out exactly alike," T.J. fibbed. "Do you have a first-aid kit?"

MacGowan looked vaguely around. "Somewhere in here," he said and gestured to the cluttered chaos. "Not sure which box."

Somehow, T.J. didn't think there'd be a problem with MacGowan finding the right one if it was needed.

* * * * *

Or he concluded when he opened the small shoe box that'd been laid out waiting for them on the bathroom vanity, the enchanted parasites would have taken presumptive action. Nice. Sort of.

MacGowan sat on the closed lid of the toilet, one leg stretched out to the side. T.J. sat on the edge of the tub—highly uncomfortable for a man who'd sported half a woody since, oh, sunset, with the foot Sur Lune had bitten resting in his lap. He dabbed a clean cotton swab over the bite mark, washing away smears of blood.

"Huh," he said when he saw the actual wound, or near lack thereof. Had Sur Lune lost a few teeth lately that he hadn't known about, such as the ones he used to rend and shred? Nah, couldn't be. He swabbed the cotton over two dainty puncture marks. Looked like MacGowan had been attacked by a rogue yet timid pin, not psychokitty on a rampage.

MacGowan waggled his foot and, in the process, nudged T.J.'s inner thigh. T.J. gripped MacGowan's ankle a smidgen too tight and hissed. "Sorry," MacGowan said, his grin belying the fact that he really, really wasn't. "Told you it wasn't a big deal."

"Surprisingly enough." T.J. poked at the tanned top of MacGowan's foot. Even as he watched, the pinpricks faded into dimples in the skin. If he closed his eyes and let his feline senses flow to the fore, he thought he'd be able to sense the undercurrent of wizardly self-healing flowing crackly as static beneath the skin. It wasn't too different from the nuclear blast he underwent when he changed forms.

Damn. His ears tingled again. He lifted his hands to indicate surrender and that MacGowan could drop his foot. "Guess I overreacted."

"All better?" MacGowan kept his foot right where he seemed comfortable. His skin had flushed faint pink beneath the nut-brownness of his beachcomber tan, and his lips were parted temptingly.

"Um," T.J. said. And "*whoa*," when MacGowan nudged his bare toes higher up T.J.'s inseam.

MacGowan kneaded T.J.'s inner thigh with his toes, the curl of them bumping and brushing, barely teasing but torturously enticing the stiffness that strained behind T.J.'s zipper. "I'm not reading you wrong, am I? You want this as much as I do."

T.J. looked down. Couldn't not, not when MacGowan's bare foot with its high arch and oddly sexy toes were at ground zero, massaging-slash-torturing him. His throat was dry, and his voice cracked when he said, "You know I do."

"Then what's stopping you?" MacGowan raised his arms and held his hands palms up.

T.J. shook his head in silence.

"Come here," MacGowan said. He lowered his foot and widened his sprawl, forming a perfect T.J.-sized cradle. "There's no reason you shouldn't, is there? Not when you're crazy for it, just like I am."

T.J. looked up at him. "Why me?"

"Huh?" MacGowan frowned at him, his confusion as transparent as a sheet of glass. "You're hot. You're nice. You know how to laugh. I like you. Why *not* you?"

MacGowan's puzzled look made something peculiarly fragile yet as twisted and spiky as barbed wire dissipate from within T.J.'s chest. He made up his mind. "Ask me again," he said.

MacGowan caught his meaning. "Is there any reason not to do this?" he asked quietly.

"No," T.J. said. "None at all." Three feet separated the tub from where MacGowan sat, and he crossed them with a grace that he usually only possessed in cat form, but seriously couldn't be bothered worrying about, not when he could feel MacGowan's body heat enveloping him. "Yippee-ki-yay, mother —"

MacGowan cut him off with a kiss.

The angle was awkward for a second, but only a second, both coming at the kiss from the same side, noses bumping. MacGowan's silent laugh reverberated through them before he took T.J. by the nape and tilted his head to one side. "Like this," he said, lips touching lips, and there, that was it. Ungainly melted to smooth, feverish, deep, hurried, slick, with MacGowan's tongue sliding between his lips and stroking over T.J.'s.

T.J. moaned and shifted higher on MacGowan's lap. His erection collided with MacGowan's, the contact even through two sets of jeans and shorts making him hiss in time with MacGowan. Unable to stop himself, he ground down to relieve some of the aching tension and kissed harder, drew MacGowan's lip between his teeth and bit.

MacGowan laughed, and T.J. stopped. "If something's funny here, I'm doing this wrong," he said, not without trepidation. It'd been a while, and if he'd lost some technique along the way —

"Not laughing at you," MacGowan said. He stroked the flats of his palms over T.J.'s hips and tugged him closer, rose up to meet T.J. on a stroke down he couldn't help. MacGowan's pupils were dilated, his breathing quickening. T.J. could almost hear the speeding pace of MacGowan's pulse. "Just thinking how weird it is to be glad a cat bit me."

T.J. stilled. *Dear God, if only he knew. He doesn't know. Does he?* "Why?"

"I'd thought it would take me days to get you here." MacGowan ducked his head and nibbled beneath T.J.'s jaw. His stubble scraped T.J.'s neck and sent good chills and prickles shivering through his skin. "Thought maybe never, not unless I threw you over my shoulder and carried you. I thought you might be shy."

T.J.'s temper flared. "I'll show you shy," he said with as much of a growl as he could when his head buzzed with the rising shout of carnal instinct. He shoved his hand between them and cupped MacGowan's hard-on, rubbing him through his jeans, feeling a pulse of triumph when MacGowan grunted and headbutted his shoulder. "How am I doing so far?"

"Not bad." MacGowan balanced him with one hand at the small of his back and pushed T.J.'s hand out of the way. "But this'd be better." He fumbled with snaps and catches and zippers. Cool air washed over his naked cock for the split second it took before the heat of MacGowan's hand sank in, wrapped around him, jacked him.

T.J.'s eyes rolled back in his head. He fought to stay balanced, and to keep his vision clear, and to watch MacGowan's tanned hand jack him firm and hard from balls to head. He rubbed his knuckles over the top and slicked his shaft on the way down. T.J.'s cock jerked in that firm grip while clear drops bubbled out to roll down over MacGowan's fingers. He rocked forward, slapping the wall, and rocked his hips, needing more, now.

More. Yeah. "Let me." He panted as he reached for MacGowan's zipper. MacGowan grunted and hitched him closer. Made the work hard, but the end result sweet when T.J. had enough room to plunge inside and grasp MacGowan's thick, rigid cock. Good God, he was a monster. T.J. thought, for a hazy split second, about that cock in him, splitting him open, and stuttered his hips. Their knuckles met, and then their cocks, and then, fuck, then MacGowan knitted their hands together around both and squeezed.

Too much, it was too much. "Gonna come," T.J. grunted. "God, I'm close, I—stop, stop, not if you don't want me to come," T.J. managed to grit out. Though he might explode from the knotted pressure in his balls, he didn't want it to be over, not this soon.

MacGowan's hair had fallen over his face, but the dark gleam in his eyes would have shone through true obsidian. "Not yet," he agreed. He licked his lips and, belying himself, lifted T.J. higher and closer.

"Where?" T.J. asked. He rode the wave, his pulse soaring and his chest tight. Maybe it wouldn't be bad to come like this, right here, right now, couldn't be better than riding MacGowan like this, could it? "How about the floor?"

MacGowan released his cock and sat back, a gloss of sweat and the redness of exertion staining his face. "God," he groaned. "Don't care where. No. Wait. Anywhere but on the john, okay?"

T.J. laughed. He couldn't help it. Neither could he help saying, when MacGowan thrust down the back of his open jeans to knead his ass, "Wherever you want. Just get us there now."

MacGowan stroked T.J.'s hips. "Think you can last?"

"Depends. Can you?" T.J. clenched his ass and stroked forward, the gathering precum on his cockhead leaving a shiny trail over MacGowan's oblique muscles.

"Is that a challenge?" MacGowan helped him rise and fall, met him on each stroke, urgency rising.

"Damn right it is."

"Good." MacGowan mouthed a path up T.J.'s neck, and bit the tip of his chin, and let go of him to push him back to his feet. "You're on."

Chapter Seven

They made it three steps into the minihallway before the smell of MacGowan, the heat rising off his skin and the nearness of his cock just barely tucked into his jeans, not to mention his roving hands everywhere on T.J.'s skin and the way they stopped step-by-step to crash their mouths together all combined in one big burst of *want* and got to T.J.

He stopped and pushed MacGowan to the wall. MacGowan cocked his head, pretended to be confused, given away by the dark, wicked tilt of his mouth. "Something wrong?"

"Yes." T.J. kissed him quick and dirty. MacGowan tasted of beer and steak, savory, good. "I'm not doing this yet."

"Not doing what?"

"Let me demonstrate." T.J. dropped to his knees and buried his face in MacGowan's open fly.

MacGowan made a noise no one could describe and bucked forward. He shoved his fingers through T.J.'s hair and gripped tight enough to make his scalp prickle deliciously. "Gonna do it?" he asked, gravel-voiced. "You like sucking cock that much?"

T.J. put out the tip of his tongue and dragged it over the rise and curve of MacGowan's darkening erection. He tasted amazing. "What do you think?"

"*Christ,*" MacGowan said. He tugged T.J.'s hair. "Stop. Don't stop. I don't care."

T.J. felt bigger than himself, as if there was too much need to be contained inside one body, like he'd explode. He nosed his way to MacGowan's cockhead, took it between his lips, and sucked for all he was worth.

MacGowan's head hit the wall with a satisfying thud. "Oh—" He gripped the sides of T.J.'s head and pushed forward. "More."

T.J. hummed around his mouthful of cock, slid the seal of his lips down the heavy length until firm bluntness hit the back of his throat. He breathed in hungrily when wiry hair tickled his nose, and swallowed.

MacGowan jackknifed; he would have choked T.J. if T.J. hadn't been prepared, hoping. He swallowed again, and a second time, exultant inside his head. Long dry spell or not, he hadn't forgotten how to do *this*. Made a man feel like a man.

Definitely not like a cat.

"More," MacGowan gritted out. He drew back to thrust forward, the path slippery with spit and precum. His cock pulsed in T.J.'s mouth, heavy on his tongue. T.J. drew off to taste him and rolled the salty traces over his taste buds while he moaned and craved more, and still more.

For the fun of it—if he was going to be this crazy, he'd do it right—he dragged the flat of his tongue up the length of MacGowan's shaft and tickled under the head, teasing the thick vein beneath.

MacGowan giggled.

Okay, not the reaction he'd hoped for. T.J. drew off with an obscene sucking *pop*, not sure if he should be offended but leaning strongly in that direction. "This is funny to you?"

MacGowan shook his head, but merriment brought out a dimple in his cheek no matter how he tried to hide it. "Tickles," he managed.

Tickles? What the — oh, no no no—T.J. tested the rasp, and a rasp it was, of his tongue over his lips. Cat tongue, rough and sandpapery, and if that was what MacGowan called *tickling* he didn't want to contemplate the limits of the guy's pain threshold. He scrubbed the back of his hand over his tongue until all he tasted was his own skin and the traces of MacGowan's fragrance, and until the flesh was smooth and sleek once more.

"Hey." MacGowan used his grip on T.J.'s head to tilt it up and look directly at him.

The heat, the blind need, tempered by confusion—T.J. hitched forward, grunted, and almost lost it there without a hand on him, not even his own. His cock pushed insistently at his open fly, demanded to be released from the constriction, precum wet on his belly and his head swimming.

MacGowan prodded the join of his jaw. "Didn't say you had to stop."

T.J. fought to keep it in, to rein it back. "Want to come like this?" he asked, voice wrecked from the thickness of MacGowan's cock thrust down his throat, the rasp thrumming through his bones. "Yes or no?"

"No. Don't want to come before I'm in you," MacGowan said, thumbing T.J.'s cheeks. "Get up. Move. *Now*."

* * * * *

They made decent progress this time, all the way to the familiar room before 165 pounds of MacGowan tackled T.J. and took him to the floor. T.J. made a noise he'd deny to his dying day was a yelp, the change in altitude and sense of falling making him sure he was going to land on all fours, a cat—

MacGowan twisted midfall to take the brunt of the impact, and T.J. landed splayed atop him, his human shape held securely in firm, steady hands. His grin was broad, bright, and unashamed. "Changed my mind," he explained.

Relief made T.J. weak in the knees but didn't stop him from struggling upright to straddle MacGowan, poised just above the point of contact. "Again?"

MacGowan licked his lower lip, swollen from kissing, leaving it shining, tempting. "Are you complaining?"

"God, no." T.J. dropped to rest on his forearms so he could reach MacGowan's mouth and attack him from above. He controlled the kiss, the crash of mouth to mouth nowhere near gentle. Savage, he took what he needed—wanted—and didn't stop until MacGowan began to thrash beneath him and cant his hips in demand for contact.

Driving a man that crazy went to a guy's head. It'd be heaven to take the pressure off his shaking legs and aching knees and drop to writhe against MacGowan, God, it would, but not yet, not yet. T.J. pinned MacGowan's hips with his knees and nuzzled him to draw it out as long as he could.

MacGowan arched, his mouth open in a wide, soundless shout. "You're—fuck, T.J., you're dripping on me—"

"I know." T.J. reached between them to smear his precum over the bunched, tense musculature of MacGowan's stomach, to rub his essence into MacGowan's skin.

"You want *me* to come?" MacGowan demanded. He tried to wrestle T.J. over, to switch top and bottom. Didn't work. T.J. nipped and worried his way down to MacGowan's collarbone, followed them left, right, and left again, all the way to the join of arm and shoulder. He thrust his tongue into the crevice and curled it, tasting darker sweat, a pungent flavor that made him grit his teeth and shudder.

"T.J.," MacGowan said. He tried to shove T.J. back, away, down, anything. "Don't know what's gotten into you, but I like it." He skimmed his hands up under T.J.'s shirt and grazed his sides, up over his nipples. The flat areola tightened, skin puckered; his nipples hardened into furled knots, and he lost his control plus his hold on MacGowan when he surged upright to clasp MacGowan's hands and keep them right where they were.

Not such a bad thing, not at all, especially since it brought him squarely down atop MacGowan, the bite of open zippers barely worth bothering about when cock rubbed cock. He stopped to groan, fists locking with MacGowan's. He rose once, lowered, and rose again. "Want me to ride you?" he asked, almost unable to believe it was *him* saying these crazy things; they weren't like him at all, but who *cared* when it felt so good to be different like this? "Ride you like a cowboy?"

MacGowan surged up and put them in the same position they'd been in before. T.J.'s legs stretched out past MacGowan, T.J. cradled on his lap, MacGowan's hands bracketed on T.J.'s face, his kiss an attack and not a caress, hungry, desperate. "Soon," MacGowan breathed over T.J.'s lips, his breath curling like steam against T.J.'s face. "Not yet."

T.J. growled. "You're killing me here."

A wicked sparkle kindled in MacGowan's eyes. "Don't tell me you don't love it."

"Fuck no," T.J. said and ground down, rubbing their cocks together. He lurched, shuddered, his orgasm almost there, almost —

MacGowan pushed him off. Confused, T.J. caught himself this time and sprawled on his ass to stare at MacGowan. "What's wrong? You —"

His question died when he saw the gathering darkness and intent in MacGowan's stare, eye contact locked in. He could swear, if he didn't know better, he saw the magic in him that MacGowan didn't know he had, and not the man himself, and it had found its prey.

Should have scared him off. Didn't. He fell eagerly under the spell, and he wanted *more*. "Want something?" he asked, replacing MacGowan's hands with his own under his shirt. He rolled and pinched his nipples and hissed, torso undulating. His cock bulged through his zipper, dark and heavy and so sore that he knew he'd lose it, soon, soon —

"Yeah," MacGowan said. He rose smoothly to one knee, stood, and held out a hand for T.J. to take. "Want you on your feet. Want you naked. Now."

T.J. made himself stay put. "Only if you take off everything too," he said in a low rasp. "And you go first."

MacGowan caught him by the wrist rather than wait and hauled him upright. "Yes."

Awkwardness threatened to set in when T.J. stood upright, his balance just off enough to make him waver on his feet. His fingers shook, too clumsy to think about doing more than making a grab for MacGowan and getting back to hardworking muscle and tightly stretched skin, to his smell and his taste and —

He bowed over with a groan, both to ward off the insistent rise of orgasm and the need to fucking attack MacGowan, not to swarm over him as a man but to worship him as a *cat*. He wanted to groom MacGowan and purr, not impale himself on MacGowan's cock, and if that didn't confuse a guy's libido, T.J. didn't know what would.

"Hey, hey, shhh, it's okay." MacGowan tipped T.J.'s chin up. The touch centered him, grounded him, left him breathing heavily between parted human lips and watching him through purely human, lust-hazy eyes. MacGowan put his hands to his own shirt. "Want me to go first? I can. I want to."

"Unh," T.J. said eloquently. He wobbled, tried to reach for MacGowan, happy to forego the foreplay and get on with the main event.

MacGowan took a step back, as unsteady as T.J. but still impishly alight with lustful fun. "Like this," he said and skinned his T-shirt off over his head. Miles of bare skin, tight with muscle and glowing with sweat, came into view and almost took T.J. back to his knees.

"Ah-ah-ah," MacGowan warned as he took one more step back. "Not done yet." He teased his open fly, scraped his thumbnail down the zipper with a *r-r-r-ip* sound, and poised his hands at the loose waist that barely clung to his hips. "Want it?"

"God, yes," T.J. said, mouth dry as cotton, out of his mind.

MacGowan bent from the waist. His jeans fell, pooling around his calves and ankles, barely there before he stepped out of them and kicked them aside in a crumpled heap of sex-saturated denim.

T.J.'s cock throbbed, and his balls burned. MacGowan naked was...was... He didn't have the words; he barely had the brain to think. *Want. Want. Want.*

"Now you," MacGowan said. He took his cock, swollen dark and painful and stiff in hand and stroked lightly, almost not touching himself. He had to be as close as T.J., maybe closer, but making it last longer. His chest heaved and tendons stood out in his neck. "Hurry."

A thought crossed what remained of T.J.'s mind and made it past his lips before he could stop himself. "No."

MacGowan's hand stilled. "Say what?"

"No." T.J. stood back and spread his arms. He'd always wanted this. Never would have a better chance than on a night of impossible things, where nothing else in the world mattered but taking and giving what he craved like a madman. "You do it. For me."

MacGowan hissed. "My God."

"Nope. Just a guy." T.J. waited, heart in his throat. "Gonna do it? Only way you're getting any." The power went to his head and undid what bits of him could still think. Nothing remained but the rising tide. "Get me naked. Get in me."

MacGowan swore under his breath, curtly, fervently, and reeled T.J. in with one long, strong arm. T.J. closed his eyes and groaned under the noise, the heavy rasp of MacGowan's breath and the popping of threads where too much force ripped the seams of his too-tight shirt and the almost painful scrape of denim down his hips, his legs. He shuddered naked, pressed to MacGowan's body. MacGowan thrust his knee between them. Their bodies aligned, his cock slipping up the sweat-slicked crease of MacGowan's hip, and MacGowan's heavy against his groin.

For a moment, they stood still, fighting it one last time. T.J. couldn't see him anymore, could only feel him and taste his breath and see his scent. He listened to the lust in MacGowan's eyes and drank down the musky-tasting scent of the sound of his thudding heartbeat. Seeing sounds. Hearing colors. Something wasn't right...not right at all...and he didn't care.

Not far away, an old, loved-in couch rested with a tangle of cords and a clumsy sheaf of paperwork strewn atop the worn navy blue corduroy. "There?" MacGowan breathed in T.J.'s ear, dark sea-salt tasting. "Say yes, *God*, okay?"

T.J. looked again, and though he couldn't see colors the way humans could, he could hear the lack of movement and could touch the gone-ness of the clutter. He'd stake his life on lube and condoms previously packed away being tucked under the now invitingly plumped cushions. He laughed loud and crazy. "Yes. Why aren't we there already?"

"Dunno." MacGowan caught T.J.'s lip between his teeth and pulled, bit, sucked. "Wanna fix that?"

He didn't wait for MacGowan to answer before he turned them roundabout and brought them down on the couch, he on his back and T.J. atop him. He stared up, hazy and dark, and groped T.J.'s ass. "You said you'd ride me. Still want to?"

T.J. felt under the cushions and found both lube and condom, just as he'd expected. He waved them in front of MacGowan's eyes. "What do you think?"

* * * * *

The couch was rougher than it looked, rubbed bare, giving where T.J. clutched at it, knuckles turning white. Eyes closed, mouth open, lost to everything. Lube, cold and slippery, warmed with the pressure and twisting thrusts of MacGowan's fingers, one, two, he didn't know how many, buried deep. Opening him, making him ready. His cock, so full and needy, thumped his stomach. Somehow, he didn't know how, he managed the coordination to tear the condom open with his teeth, spit out the wrapper, and smooth it on MacGowan's cock as it strained up toward him.

This was crazy, this was pure adrenaline, this was nothing like what he'd known during other fucks, and if this was how sex should be, then he'd missed out on a hell of a lot, but not anymore. No settling for anything less than this. MacGowan, he...he—

More lube, more stretching, but it was enough, too much. Sweat dripped off T.J.'s forehead and stung his eyes when he forced them open to look down at MacGowan. MacGowan, who looked more like an animal than a man, which made T.J. laugh before MacGowan lifted his hips and blunt pressure nudged his hole. There all too quickly, gone far too soon. When T.J. snarled, MacGowan laughed.

"Hot," MacGowan said, stroking T.J.'s face with lube-sticky fingers. "So hot; T.J., I swear you don't know what you do to me."

"Yeah? Then do something to *me* already." T.J. grunted, the punch in his gut that came of MacGowan's panted words forcing a thick strand of precum from his cock that puddled on MacGowan's chest. He bore down to fuck himself on MacGowan's fingers. Not enough. He grasped MacGowan's cock, so dark, so thick, and squeezed. "Put that where it belongs."

MacGowan shut his eyes tight, strain lines at the corners, and shook. He held his breath and let it out on a shaking not-quite-laugh. "Who knew you'd be such a wildcat in bed?"

T.J. didn't bother flinching. He didn't care, not now. "*In.*"

"Okay, shh, I've got you." MacGowan struggled up on one elbow, gave up, and lay down, grasping T.J.'s hips. "Not coordinated. Thing. Can't."

"Not a problem. Hold yourself steady for me—like that—" T.J. rose, poised, sank down, caught MacGowan's hands, and shuddered out a lusty breath. The girth split him open and speared him so deeply he thought he'd never reach the end, but when his ass met MacGowan's hips, he wished there had been more. He wanted enough of MacGowan to be able to taste the man in the back of his throat.

He knotted his fingers together with MacGowan's and rose as high as he could. Not high; his legs were sore and aching and almost gave out. MacGowan met him halfway, as much as he could, not much. He tossed his head to and fro on the couch, strands of hair stuck to his cheeks with sweat and his mouth open in helpless hiccups that were words unborn.

He swallowed, thrust up, ground T.J.'s finger bones together, undone and fucking gorgeous. "You...you close? I'm—want it to last, but—"

"Next time," T.J. grunted, feeling it rise, his balls painfully tight, his toes curled so hard. He shifted, barely a hitch deeper, and there, that was it. "MacGowan—oh God, fuck, *MacGowan*—"

His cum splashed MacGowan from chest to navel, creamy stripes and thick strings, the pulses going on as if they'd never end. MacGowan arched his back, neck tight and strained, mouth open wide in a shout. He stiffened, swelled impossibly harder inside T.J., and stilled.

"Now," he rasped, barely a whisper, barely aloud, surged up, and came with a force that rattled T.J.'s bones and made his spent, too-sensitive cock jerk and squeeze out one more splash of cum.

T.J. didn't remember collapsing forward, or MacGowan's cock slipping out, or anything but licking his cum off MacGowan's torso. He didn't even care when MacGowan chuffed out what would have been a giggle from a less-wrung-out man and mumbled, "Tickling again," and pushed ineffectually at his head. The taste of his cum mingled with MacGowan's skin layered heavily on his tongue and tasted of music when he thumped his head to rest over MacGowan's heart and rocked to the rhythm of his slowing, thundering heartbeat.

Good *God*.

"I want seconds, as soon as I can breathe," MacGowan told him, slurred and barely understandable. Didn't matter; T.J. got the gist, and he would have nodded if he hadn't been fucked out past the point of doing more than licking under MacGowan's chin.

Something odd about that. Again. What was it...? *Ah, who cares?* The couch was just big enough for T.J. to wriggle toward the back, all the better to curl up atop MacGowan. They'd be sticky in the morning, gross, but they could share a shower. He'd bet MacGowan would be up for that. *Up. God, I hope.*

MacGowan stroked his hair idly, clumsily, almost asleep beneath him. "Didn't think you'd be like that," he mumbled. "'S good. Keeping you. Want you again, soon..." He loosed a jaw-cracking yawn. "Maybe sleep some first..." His body went lax, his breathing easing and his hand falling away from T.J.'s head.

Suited T.J. fine; he had the whole of MacGowan's naked body to enjoy the feel of. Knowing he wouldn't have to sneak out in the morning, knowing he'd see MacGowan again. And again.

"*Next time,*" he'd said, and MacGowan had said, "*Want you again, soon.*" Soon couldn't come fast enough, but he had time now. *Whoa. I could get used to this.*

Call him a liar, but maybe he could be convinced to believe in love, and he'd hang on to this with all four sets of claws. He pricked MacGowan's skin with them, marking his claim, squirmed about on his side, and butted his head beneath MacGowan's chin, and meowed, a sleepy chirrup of pure contentment.

He was too busy falling asleep to notice the changing of his hands to paws and the rising rumble of a purr that reverberated in time with MacGowan's small, quiet sleeping breaths...

Chapter Eight

When T.J. woke, it was with the sleepy, half-formed expectation of a good long stretch to work out the creaks and to savor the aches and sore, stinging spots he'd acquired the night before. He'd lie in his warm nest, cling to the last traces of his dreams, and float in the fucked-out euphoria of his recently acquired memories. He'd enjoy a really good scratch.

Maybe, after he finally relinquished sleep, there'd be coffee. Odds were good the magical parasites—he knew there were better names for them, but his feline nature stubbornly stuck with the original designation—would preempt his search for coffee among all MacGowan's clutter. Or if MacGowan wasn't the kind of guy who started the day with a steaming cup of joe, they would flit down to the corner store and come back with all the fixings. If they pulled *that* off, he'd have to stop calling them parasites. They still gave him the creeps, like cockroaches with cleaning fetishes. Together with their Formula 409, they'd outlast the apocalypse.

There were certain things the brain, man or cat, wasn't equipped to cope with without a comforting, protective layer of sarcasm.

The allure of coffee led T.J., however reluctantly, out of couch-cum-bed. Sort of. Everything went according to plan up until T.J. tried to raise his arms over his head to pop his elbow joints and to arch his back, and found he couldn't. Specifically because he didn't have arms, not as such. He had six-inch legs covered in gray tabby fur with paws and claws at their ends, and when he wriggled in horror, he felt his tail whipping the sheets in the "there's about to be serious trouble here" cat's warning.

He lay very, very still and sneaked a peek to his right. Good *God*, MacGowan looked huge from the feline perspective. The heat of his body and the sleep-heavy weight of his arm made for an overall sensation uncomfortably reminiscent of a meat blanket, and if that image didn't kill the morning-after buzz, T.J. didn't know what would.

He closed his eyes, concentrated, and prayed for the morphic switch to flip so he could regain his human shape.

And prayed.

And prayed some more.

And when absolutely jackshit happened, panicked and blasphemed heartily enough to damn himself to the deepest layer of hell.

I can't change back. He flattened to a cat-shaped puddle of fur and tried not to completely lose his cool. *Calm down. Don't panic.* Options. He had to have some. As he thought, T.J.'s ears swiveled, lay back, twitched forward, cocked, drooped. Before options had to come analysis. Cats were great at analyzing. T.J. applied his brain to that and came up with:

MacGowan fell asleep next to a man. He will wake next to a cat. MacGowan is a cool dude, but I doubt he's into bestiality.

God, I hope he's not. Ugh.

Therefore, when MacGowan wakes to find me-as-cat in bed with him, the likelihood is that he will: 1) wonder where the human went, and 2) think the human – me – was enough of a dick to sneak out without so much as an "I'll call you."

So, yeah. There was no way this could end well.

Before he could proceed any further down Circular Logic Lane, MacGowan snuffled, mumbled, and stirred.

Let whoever might blame him go right ahead. T.J. panicked. He rolled out from beneath MacGowan's blanketing arm, flipped and wriggled his way off the couch, and hit the floor on four feet. *Rollin', rollin', rollin', keep those cats a-rollin', banzai!* He corkscrew-wriggled his way beneath, blanketed and hidden in dark shadows, and just in time to hear MacGowan shift on the couch cushions above.

"T.J.?" MacGowan asked, sleepy-sounding. T.J. heard a *pat, pat, pat* noise, immediately identifiable as a barely awake man searching the sleeping space for the guy he'd forked and spooned with recently enough to still feel the burn.

T.J. then heard the small, disappointed sigh and lashed his tail in anger at himself. Great; that was great; that was just...peachy.

MacGowan's feet hit the floor on the near side of the couch. T.J. writhed in an about-face that would have earned him a gold medal in the Boneless Olympics and sneaked forward on his belly with stealthiness that would have made General Patton proud. His nose two inches from MacGowan's Achilles tendon, he listened to MacGowan enjoy a proper human-sized stretch accompanied by a lip-smacking yawn, and – was it? – a satisfying scratch from a human hand. More stretching and contented cracking noises followed.

As well as one small, resigned sigh.

T.J. peeked his nose out from beneath the edge of the couch and craned his head to get a good look at MacGowan walking away, naked as the day he was born. Gloriously

naked. Miles-of-California-tanned-skin naked. Unselfconsciously, and rightly so, free in his nakedness. Unhindered and unpounced-upon, even, which so would not have been the case had T.J. been bipedal enough to take advantage.

He could still pounce MacGowan right now if he was so inclined, but claws plus bare human flesh? T.J. wasn't that kind of guy. Cat. Whatever. Besides, MacGowan was already marked up deliciously, red welts and purpling bruises smeared across hip bones and thighs and biceps, bite marks dotting chest and shoulder, hickeys crimson on his neck, and beard burn rosy on his cheeks.

T.J. bit his tail to keep from snarling at the general bitch that was life as a shifter and to keep it from thumping the floor like a demented bongo drum. Better to concentrate on the beauty that was MacGowan the night after fucking like animals—so to speak—languid and slow-moving as warm honey and sexily tousled. MacGowan, walking toward the bathroom, apparently secure enough in his prowess not to be bothered by his new lover's absence.

Either that was a compliment, or it was an insult. T.J. wasn't sure where the line fell, there. He *was*, on the other hand, mind-numbingly aware that in three, two, one steps MacGowan would stumble across the clothes they'd *both* left strewn along the way the night before. That he'd put two and two together and comprehend that either T.J. had left the apartment bare-ass naked in his hurry to get away, or that—

Or nothing. MacGowan wasn't looking down, and he didn't notice the tangled heaps of clothing unfurling themselves from the crinkled, wrinkled masses they'd fallen in and being dragged off to the side, out of his path and out of his sight. No trip hazards allowed by the parasites, T.J. guessed.

Fine. They were off the "parasite" list. Didn't mean he wasn't going to stalk, pounce, and pin one with the sharp ends of his claws if he had a chance to get answers out of any of them. Answers were important when he had a pressing question that they might be able to address, namely: *what the hell is going on here?* Screw space limitations; he tried to flip that good old switch again and nada.

Which left him with one option: make a break for it. As soon as he heard the familiar sound of a toilet seat rising and water hitting water, T.J. slithered out from beneath the couch and made a run for the window-shaped escape hatch that was becoming depressingly familiar.

And a moment later, hid behind the curtains, because MacGowan apparently had iron bladder control and came stumbling out, confused, when he heard the screech of claws on glass and rustling beige blinds.

Fortunately, what he *didn't* have—yet—was the mental awareness to figure the noise came from inside. He hopped his way into a pair of sweatpants lain discreetly within eye view and fumbled open the door to peer around blearily in the early-morning light.

One chance. Did he dare take it? If T.J. wanted answers, which he had his best shot at getting from Mr. Jontan or maybe even Arden—he'd take anything at this point—he had to make his break for freedom.

He didn't do too poorly, at least not before he tried to zip past MacGowan's feet, whereupon he found himself deftly scruffed and lifted. "There you are," MacGowan crooned. "Hope we didn't freak you out last night, Buddy. C'mon. I never did give you that tuna. Want some breakfast?"

T.J.'s stomach rumbled. Despite himself, he purred. That was all MacGowan needed; he toed the door shut.

Not all was lost, though. In the tiniest bit of dubious luck, the door closed slowly enough for T.J. to get a peek at Sur Lune lurking in the forsythia. Sur Lune loathed sunlight and was vehemently opposed to doing anyone any favors, but what the hell.

"*Tell the guys what's going on!*" he caterwauled, climbing MacGowan's shoulder. "*Help!*"

Sur Lune sneered at him, whiskers bristling, and then he was gone.

Crap!

* * * * *

So, maybe it wasn't all bad being stuck in cat form for the time being. MacGowan was indeed not the kind of guy who enjoyed a cup of java in the morning, but seemed to have an alarming addiction to smoothies with what looked unappealingly like wheat germ and papaya. On the bright side, he was generous with the tuna. Albacore packed in spring water, the whole can dumped out on a saucer and presented to T.J. with a gentle knuckle rub behind his ears.

He did what any cat would do under the circumstances: devoured mass quantities while keeping one eye on the door and his brain busily whirring. Sur Lune could only be counted on to snicker at him, with a side order of gloating; odds were ten out of ten he wouldn't pass the message along to anyone.

MacGowan slurped his smoothie while propped on the kitchen counter and gazed lazily out the facing window. He made a face. T.J. wondered if it was due to a dollop of wheat germ stuck to his tongue before he murmured, "Forgot to clean the grill. Man, I hope that Arden character took all the meat we didn't get around to. I'm not awake enough to deal with dancing rice."

T.J. pondered that for a moment before the associations between discarded meat and its inevitable state of decay hit him, and nosed his mostly finished saucer of tuna away from him, appetite a goner. There was a human brain inside the cat body, after all. Not literally. His head would be out of proportion. *Anyway.*

He kept an eye on MacGowan while he pretended to lick his paws and wash his face. Any second now, he'd bet MacGowan would go out and check the aforementioned grill. It'd hurt MacGowan's feelings when the cat he'd just fed like a king zoomed past

him, successfully this time, and headed for the hinterlands. But once T.J. had found someone who could help, the man MacGowan had fucked could come back and soothe his feelings. That could happen, right?

Right. T.J. hunkered down on his hindquarters as MacGowan ambled toward the door. Tensed in preparation for a spring to freedom. *Second time's the charm. I don't care if that's not how the saying goes.*

The door opened on Arden, who had his hand raised with knuckles out to knock. He looked far the worse for wear than MacGowan or even T.J. did, dark circles under his eyes and hair that'd been slept in before washing out any product. It left him looking like a hungover hedgehog with an attitude problem. Gawking at him almost cost T.J. his chance. He snapped out of the horrified fascination in time to gather the strength in his hind legs, run, *jump* –

And was clotheslined by MacGowan, who moved far too quickly for T.J.'s good. "Sorry," he apologized, tucking T.J.-the-cat to his chest. "This guy's crazy to get out. I need to take him to the vet today to make sure he's healthy, and he probably knows what's coming."

T.J. stiffened. *Vet.* Vets enjoyed doing things like sticking him with needles, shoving thermometers up orifices, and noting that he wasn't neutered and would they like to set up an appointment to take care of that?

Arden's snort of laughter was almost but not quite muffled by his fake cough. "Cute little dickens, isn't he?" he asked, rubbing his thumb across the top of T.J.'s head.

T.J. bared his teeth and hissed. MacGowan tapped his ear. "Buddy, behave," he scolded. Then, with a light of interest dawning, he asked, "Hey, have you seen T.J. today?"

"Not since last night, but I have a good idea where he spent the night." Arden eyed MacGowan's multiple love bites and bruises. "And maybe I need to ask for some pointers."

MacGowan neither blushed nor tried to hide anything. The man had balls. T.J. did too, and he had a lot invested in keeping them. A visit to the vet had to be avoided at all costs. He turned a pleading stare on Arden instead and mewed.

Arden narrowed his eyes at T.J. "That's not fair," he muttered.

"What?" MacGowan asked, confused.

"Nothing, never mind me. I, uh, talk to myself sometimes." Arden cleared his throat. "Look, I think that might be Mr. Jontan's cat. The weird, bookish guy who carries a library on his back? He said something about finding a stray he'd planned to help." Arden said that last with a pointed stare at T.J. "Got the tip from some guy called Sur Lune that the tabby in question might be here."

T.J. gawked at Arden. Sur Lune had *helped*? Why? A quick craning of his neck to look at the sky reassured T.J. that it wasn't falling or raining frogs, so the world must not have been at an end, which begged the question: what the hell?

Or to zero in on the heart of the matter, what would Sur Lune want as payment?

Arden rubbed the back of his neck. "Sur Lune's an ass, but he's not a liar," he said. "Spoke to Mr. Jontan, and he said if you don't mind, keep the cat here today until he comes by after work to pick him up."

T.J. was back to hissing.

"Cranky little dude, isn't he?" Arden smirked, stuffed his hands in his pockets, and walked away. "Don't worry. Mr. Jontan's going to take good care of the cat. Just give him time."

"Okay..." MacGowan said, sounding understandably freaked. "No problem. I'm not going anywhere today. Have T.J. call me if you see him, okay?"

"I'll definitely do that. Such a cute scamp." Arden leered at T.J. "Take it easy, you two."

"Weird, weird guy," MacGowan said under his breath as Arden swung away and ambled down the sidewalk. "I'm glad you have an owner, but I did want to keep you." He sighed.

Now that's not fair. T.J. bumped MacGowan's chest with his head and purred at highest volume to comfort him.

"I have you for now, at least." MacGowan stroked his ruff. "What about it, Buddy? Mind spending the day with me?"

Chapter Nine

MacGowan unpacked. By hand. Apparently MacGowan was okay with him wandering around on his own as long as the door and windows were closed, and were they ever. Unhindered, T.J. got busy with the hunt for answers—and for magical cockroaches with an inbred desire to be neat and tidy.

Okay, *brownies*. Whatever. They were still prey for a cat who wanted some answers and whose naturally limited patience had frayed to the snapping point. Being trapped would do that to a guy.

"Books, books, CDs, why do I have spoons in with my towels?" MacGowan muttered as he opened box after box. "Spoons, a salt shaker, a Tom Clancy novel, and three towels. Was I on crack when I packed these?"

T.J. paused to cock an ear to that. If he'd had the time to be bothered, he'd have thought something along the lines of *aww, cute*. MacGowan had perplexed wrinkles on his forehead and looked about as endearing as a puppy confronted with a choice between a ball and a bone.

Er. Maybe not the best analogy.

MacGowan's cell rang. Though he'd left it in his pocket in wherever their clothes had been tidied away to, the phone discreetly appeared close enough to hand to grab, which MacGowan did without a second's "what the huh?" thought as to how it'd gotten there.

Hmm. T.J. wondered exactly how long this had been going on. He'd bet it was more than any of them had suspected. MacGowan might have gotten used to things falling handily in his path. It'd have explained a lot about his laid-back demeanor, T.J. thought. *What, me worry?* was a lot easier to pull off when a guy never *did* have to worry about anything.

"Yo, Shavey!" MacGowan exclaimed happily, sitting back against a tall box. "What's up? No, I didn't return your call. I was busy." He paused. "Don't ask the question if you don't want to hear the answer, man. Uh-huh. Yep. Until we passed out, that's how long. Speaking of long—" He paused long enough to hoot in delight, hopefully, T.J. prayed, at Shavey's likely incoherent spluttering, and not at his girth. Which he had no reason to be ashamed of, thank you very much.

Usually. Miniaturization was a bitch in tabby-cat shape.

MacGowan huffed and tucked the phone between ear and shoulder to free his hands for ripping the tape off a box chosen at random. "Yes, *Mom*. Stop worrying about me, would you? He's a decent guy." Pause. "I don't know how I know, just that I do. I can feel it. There's something different about him." Pause. "No, he wasn't here when I got up. He probably had to be somewhere." Pause, angrier in nature. "Fuck you. He'll have a good reason. He's... I don't know; I know I could tell if he was screwing around."

Guilty, T.J. cringed and tuned MacGowan out for the sake of reapplying himself to the hunt for brownies. They had to know why he couldn't shift back, right? They doted almost sickeningly upon MacGowan. If he could convince them to tidy away whatever magical snarl kept him in cat shape...

The brownies' scent was faint, almost undetectable, but that whiff of lemon-scented Pledge they occasionally emitted was also unmistakable. He crept around a stack of three boxes marked SHEETS, which rattled when accidentally bumped, and past an electrical spool he suspected served as a coffee table. Over, around, through, the scent of wood polish strong in his nose, almost there—*ha!* A flicker of movement behind the couch.

You're mine, sucker. T.J. lashed his tail, ready to jump for it.

Unfortunately, that old cliché about looking before you leap popped up first and smacked him in his sensitive nose. Or more accurately, he jumped at the same time MacGowan clicked his phone shut in frustration, stood, and was in precisely the wrong spot at the wrong time. T.J. headbutted him in the gut midflight.

MacGowan *oofed*. T.J. yowled. They both went flying. T.J. landed, as a cat should, on all fours. MacGowan, lacking the balance of a tail and two extra feet, wobbled dangerously with the wind knocked out of him and then pitched forward, arms flailing.

For T.J., time wound down to slow motion. The electric-spool coffee table was directly in MacGowan's flight path. He'd conk his head on the edge and either end up with a half-moon bruise on his forehead or possibly give himself a concussion, and T.J. wasn't going to think of worse things that could happen, but odds were good luck wasn't on their side. He wailed at the top of his lungs and willed himself to move. No good.

And at the last possible second, the couch zipped "on its own" across the floor to break MacGowan's fall.

MacGowan groaned. The couch creaked. T.J. froze and stared. For a tension-filled moment, all was still and quiet. Too quiet.

Seconds before T.J. would have allowed himself to freak out about the possibility of cracked ribs that punctured lungs and other snapped bones, such as those in the neck from couch-induced whiplash, MacGowan sucked in a hugely noisy breath and flopped over to collapse on the cushions.

T.J. was on his lap before he knew he'd moved, body shaking with the force of his purrs *and nothing else*.

MacGowan patted him with an absent and slightly shuddery hand. "What just happened?" he asked, rhetorically but with definite angry intent. "That didn't just happen, did it?"

T.J. meowed dolefully. *Sorry, pal. Afraid it did.*

The electrical spool turned on its side and rolled away tumbleweed-fashion. So the brownies had a sense of film melodrama. Good to know.

Or you know. Not.

* * * * *

What happened next was, T.J. figured, inevitable. *It's the same old story the whole world over. Man meets man. Man falls for man. Man changes into a cat and can't change back. Other man discovers magical furniture movers in his apartment. Eventually, he hoped, they'd get back around to man changes back from cat and carries the first man off to Fiji. Someplace warm with potent rum drinks served in hollowed-out coconut shells.*

Or maybe to the nearby lake. Anywhere but here.

But since life loved to throw those monkey wrenches, not to mention assorted hammers, nails, and screwdrivers into the works, the process stalled out right in the middle of "other man discovers." And as T.J. dourly predicted, "man who discovered strange and unusual happenings" decided to poke them with a stick to see what'd happen. It was the equivalent of going into the haunted house to see what that creaky noise was, and never mind the killer in the hockey mask and the long black robe reported to be seen in the area.

T.J. thought it was possible that he might be a tiny bit hysterical. Just a tad. He'd dare anyone to blame him for getting worked up into a frenzy.

He might, however, blame himself for melting into a docile lump of purring fur when MacGowan's hand settled on him, warm and comforting and solid. Eh, a guy had to take what he could when he could, right? Too bad that once MacGowan relaxed a tad, the light of curiosity blazed bright and his uneasy need to investigate became nearly palpable.

"Did you see that?" MacGowan whispered to him.

He had to be one of those guys who was comfortable talking to the animals, didn't he? T.J. tried to project "nope, didn't see a thing" innocence. The human mind was, if

successfully distracted, great at ignoring the impossible. Most human minds. As T.J. wriggled onto his back and, blushing on the inside at the indignity, presented his furry belly in an invitation for further petting, he discovered that MacGowan was not one to ignore the bizarre and fascinating.

Blast.

MacGowan hitched forward on the couch, knees akimbo, and gestured hesitantly at a fallen box that had made alarming *crash-clink-tinkle-crash* noises when he'd knocked it aside midpratfall. When nothing happened, he frowned and tried again, his lips moving in silent command. T.J. couldn't read lips but he'd lay odds on the words MacGowan uttered being along the lines of "hey, presto."

With no accompanying whiff of cleaning products to herald the presence of a brownie, this one was all MacGowan. It was not unlike watching someone hold a lighted match to the frayed edge of a dynamite fuse. He sank his chin on his paws as the box righted itself with only a slight wobble.

MacGowan was about as happy with this development as a kid on Christmas morning who'd found not a lump of coal in his stocking, but instead a live piranha. He jabbed two fingers at the box and muttered, "Abracadabra! I don't remember smoking anything last night. Maybe it's a flashback."

Ah, California, T.J. thought. He held still in the hope that memory would confuse MacGowan. Not that he minded so much MacGowan discovering what he could do and how. He just knew how incredibly deep the river of shit could abruptly dip when someone who didn't have a clue how they were working the eldritch forces got giddy on power.

At first, it looked like the crisis was temporarily averted. No matter how MacGowan might mutter and gesticulate, the box remained stubbornly shut and sealed with masking tape. Okay, so it jiggled once or twice with a tinkle of broken crockery, but he'd still call that a win.

And he did, right up to the point where MacGowan stopped to rub T.J.'s feline ears and wiggled his toes at the box. T.J. felt it then, the rush of calming, steadying influence flowing from him much against his will, through MacGowan's arm to the seat of his intent.

He could almost hear Arden snickering inside his head. *Does this look "familiar" to you?*

This was dangerous. He had to get out of here and get some help. He...

"Buddy, shh," MacGowan said over the rush of magic flowing from one to the other of them. "I need you to be a good cat for me now, okay? Be a good, quiet cat."

What had he been thinking? T.J. blinked, struggled to remember what he'd just had on his mind—seemed as if it'd been important—then shrugged as best as a cat could and did what came naturally. He channeled more assistance and power through the link between neophyte wizard and familiar and watched, his purr loud and

sonorous, while the tape zipped back, the box opened, and shards of broken plates popped out to reconstruct themselves into Fiestaware.

He butted his head against MacGowan's thigh and forgot everything else. This was where he was meant to be and what he'd been made to do. Nothing besides this mattered. Not even his name... What was his name again?

MacGowan's hand, shaking perceptibly, tightened uncomfortably on T.J.'s ruff. He meowed his protest. MacGowan winced and let go. "Sorry, Buddy. Sorry."

Buddy. Right. How had he forgotten?

"*Meow,*" Buddy said, kneading the couch and rumbling purrs to his heart's content. "*Mrrow.*"

Chapter Ten

Troubles might come and troubles might go, but fuck 'em all. Buddy had a sunbeam. All was right with his world. He rolled to follow the warmth; stupid yellow sun kept *moving* when it should know its proper duty was to stay put and let him bask. He found the sweet spot again when he wriggled onto his back, forepaws dangling over his belly and the rest of him inelegantly arranged but far too comfortable to care.

Besides, it made his human laugh, and his human had not done nearly enough of that in the past however-many-long-times, so that suited Buddy just fine.

So why didn't he hear any chuckling or praise? Not cool. Though his eyes were closed against the brightness of the late-afternoon sun, Buddy chirruped encouragement to his human and twitched his tail to attract his human's eye.

No response.

Annoyed, he peeked at his human. Not good. Instead of paying attention to *the cat*, as a human should, he sat on the big-square-cushion-thing with his legs drawn up and crossed like a grasshopper, pointy-knobby-chin-bone in his paw, no, *hand*, staring out the window.

That wouldn't do. Buddy writhed to his feet and padded to stand beneath the human's bare hindpaw, no, *foot*, which dangled off the square-cushion-thing. *Couch?* Buddy shrugged mentally and bonked the human's foot with his head, then purred.

The human reached down and absently stroked Buddy's hindquarters. "Good boy," he said, clearly not meaning it, *clearly* distracted by something not important, i.e., not *the cat*.

Buddy meowed at him, lower and angrier. His human blinked down at him as if he was surprised at Buddy showing his temper. Dumb human. He was lucky it was just the voice. The claws would come next.

Still, his human wasn't bad as they went. He had cans of salty fish he fed Buddy, and bowls of sweet water, and Buddy suspected he could score some milk next. Speaking of which, it'd been almost a full however long since he'd last eaten. Buddy rubbed his chin against his human's foot and caterwauled a direct order: *feed me*.

"Seriously?" his human asked in a way that did not promise prompt delivery of snacks. "You can't be hungry again. Where do you put it all?"

Buddy purred louder and sat on his hind legs to bat his human's leg with his paws, claws sheathed. *Feed me*. It wasn't as if his human even had to get up from the couch-thing. He'd seen for himself, thank you, how his human had been able to summon a can of salty fish from a box-thing by no more than waving his hand and watching it float to him. That'd been after he'd made the entire room of boxes unpack themselves. Right, Buddy remembered now. His human hadn't seemed happy about the convenience. More like scared, and maybe sad too.

Pfft. Humans. Why worry about things that made life easier? Like summoning tuna. That was all kinds of handy. Speaking of which, again, Buddy tapped MacGowan's foot with his paw. *Food now, please*.

Rat-a-tat-tat. Buddy flinched and wheeled about, claws planted and tail bristled fat. "Chill, Buddy," his human said as he unfolded himself from the couch-thing. "Who's there?"

"Someone who's not in the mood for knock-knock jokes," another human answered from outside. "Mr. Jontan sent me for the cat. Is he still here? Or have you seen T.J. anywhere around since this morning?"

Buddy stopped in the middle of considering the very important question of fleeing or fighting, a shock like fingers made of static electricity riffling through his brain. *T.J.*? That sounded...weirdly familiar...

"T.J.?" His human—his name was *MacGowan*; Buddy remembered now—opened the door and let in someone tall and skinny. His name was Arden. Buddy remembered that too. The sensation was similar to having someone shuffle his head like a deck of cards.

T.J. What was...?

"Also, I think this joker came by to pick some kind of bone with you." Arden blocked the doorway and kept someone tall, dark, and built like a brick shithouse from getting through behind him. He shook his head at Buddy, then shaped the word *T.J.* with his lips. "He might be friendly, but he's one ugly son of a bitch, isn't he?"

"Hey!" MacGowan bristled. "I don't care if you are T.J.'s friend, watch what you say about my cat."

Oh, crap. T.J. I am T.J. T.J. is me. Crap, fuck, hell, crap! To add the cherry to the top of the shit sundae, as awareness flooded back in, the morphic switch picked now of all times to start ticking over.

"The things I have to do," Arden muttered. He shouted and stomped his feet. MacGowan yelped in surprise. T.J.'s inner and outer cat made a vertical leap that defied

physics—but he hit the ground thankful and running, barreling through Arden’s legs and out into the night.

“Sorry. Thought I saw a spider,” Arden explained. “Calm down! I’ll help you look—”

T.J. heard him at a distance, already halfway up the stairs. He stopped to catch his breath once hidden behind the turn that was swathed in forsythia and shivered, naked and human. He’d have to thank Arden for that.

Later, though. Later. After he *killed* him. For not getting there sooner, for not fixing this before T.J. had turned into a Garfieldesque wunderkat, for being a pain in the ass, and on general principle.

First, he needed to be a little less naked.

* * * * *

Dressed in the first clothes he could grab that passed the sniff test—track pants and an old T-shirt—T.J. took the steps back down to MacGowan’s place at a run. Near the bottom, he decided *screw it* and made the leap over the last four to land with a jarring *thud*.

The argument, which had reached “neighbors about to call the police” volume, stopped. Dead silence plus three stares greeted him. Arden, trying not to laugh. Some guy who’d apparently eaten every bowl of Wheaties ever put in front of him, shooting death rays at him. T.J. frankly couldn’t give too much of a flip about those jokers, because behind them MacGowan brightened in hopeful relief, and MacGowan was who he’d come back down here for.

Mine.

“Look who was man enough to get down here on his own two feet,” Arden said. He eyed T.J. up and down, nay, leered, just to hammer home the point that T.J. had remained human, hurray for him. T.J. had already gotten that memo, thanks, and he’d worry about whatever-the-fuck later.

He needed to get to MacGowan and cover his back first.

Slight stumbling block: T.J.’s first attempt to get through was blocked by a hand the approximate size of a Christmas ham flat-palming his chest like a battering ram stopping an oncoming brick wall. Andre the Unfriendly Giant curled his lip at T.J. from a great height. “You’re not serious, MacGowan. *This* is the guy you’re being an idiot over?”

Insults to him, T.J. could deal with. He was used to those. An insult to MacGowan, now, those were fightin’ words. He bristled. “You want to go, Jolly Green?”

Behind the giant, where he leaned on the wall with his arms crossed tight, MacGowan shook his head, pleading. T.J. scoffed at the big ass and used a touch of semifeline grace to writhe beneath his meaty paw and past, to MacGowan’s side, where he couldn’t shake the feeling was where he belonged, full stop.

"Shavey, leave him alone," MacGowan said before the behemoth could follow T.J. "If you have a problem, take it up with me."

"I'd like to," Beowulf—sorry, Shavey—snapped. For a man built like a gay fullback's wet dream, he had an unexpectedly mellow voice. Huh. Probably a built-in fighting tactic. Take 'em off guard by singing soprano and then take out *their* balls. "Too bad this prick is in my way." He jabbed his forefinger at T.J., who lifted his chin, unafraid. "You're next, geek."

T.J. shoved down the urge to hiss and jump at Shavey with extended claws he mercifully didn't have at the actual moment. MacGowan touched his arm, the warmth settling something in T.J. that wanted to taste blood.

"Don't?" MacGowan asked. He looked younger than his years, miserable, and alone despite the presence of his "friend."

For MacGowan's sake, and MacGowan's only, T.J. slouched against the wall by MacGowan's side and behaved.

Arden eyed them, snorted, and turned on Shavey. Static electricity fairly crackled along his skin and made his grin extra crazy. Soccer hooligans all the world over only wished they were as good as Arden in a fight. "You were saying something? Calling my friend a prick? Want to try that again?"

"Guys, knock it off!" MacGowan shouted, to no effect. He growled under his breath and thumped the back of his head on the wall. Not uncoincidentally, T.J. knew, the moves brought him close enough to T.J. for their arms to touch. "I had to try," he said, turning to grimace at T.J. in apology. "Shavey doesn't stop until someone TKO's him. What about Arden?"

"He doesn't stop until he's jumping up and down on bloody remains."

"Perfect." MacGowan leaned more of his weight on T.J. Would have been nice, warm, cozy, except for how MacGowan's muscles twitched with barely restrained fury. "I've had a rotten day, T.J., and I'm so not in the mood for this. I'm not a delicate flower, you know?"

Pure stupidity made T.J. ask, "What happened?" Then, on second thought, changed tacks. "Why's he think you need defending, anyway? You're a big boy." T.J. tuned out Arden and Shavey's creative insults to focus on MacGowan. Torn between fury and frustration was a good look on him. Brought color to his face and fire to his blood. Not that he didn't prefer MacGowan strung out, needy, and on the edge of orgasm, because c'mon. No contest.

MacGowan looked so sharply away that T.J. knew he'd struck a nerve. "I've made bad choices before. Been in some rough situations. He helped me pick up the pieces."

Ah. "And he figures that gives him free license to poke his nose in every time you get a man-crush?"

MacGowan's muscles tensed. The flex had an odd sensation of gathering energy that made T.J.'s inner feline's fur stand on end. *Uh-oh.*

"I've made some mistakes," MacGowan said. "You're not one of them. I can *feel* it. Shavey doesn't see it that way. It's not you. Shavey would probably drag Prince Charming off his white horse to draw and quarter him."

There was friendship, there was protectiveness, and there was outright insanity. Shavey wore a tailored suit, loafers that cost more than T.J. figured he himself made in a month, and had one of those trimmed-one-hair-at-a-time haircuts, so insanity wasn't too likely an option. Which left him wondering... "Exactly how big and bad were these mistakes of yours? On a scale of 'he told me not to worry about the condom,' no insult to your intelligence, all the way up to 'I fell in love with a man on death row.'"

He thought, for a second, that MacGowan would pop him in the jaw for that one. Instead, MacGowan ducked his head with the tiniest of reluctant grins. "Neither. I do fall in love. Guys usually don't love me back."

Huh. Unexpected. "Who wouldn't love you?"

"Got me," MacGowan said. The lack of fake humility was refreshing. "It's like I'm cursed."

Ah. T.J. stiffened. A throwaway line? Maybe, or maybe not. Put it together with the crazy magic that followed MacGowan around like a lost puppy begging to be taken home, and he might just be on to something there.

Before he could ask, an outraged squawk from Shavey drew his attention sharply back to the fight in progress. Arden bounced on his heels in the style of a boxer right after delivering a solid uppercut. "What's the matter? Can't handle a taste of your own medicine?" he goaded. "Tastes bitter, doesn't it?"

Shavey made a face like a lemon sucking on a lemon. Too bad. Underneath the bark, the bite, and the gingery temper, he wasn't a bad-looking guy. Not at all, in fact, if you went for the he-man bruiser type.

Wait. T.J. eyed Arden in sudden alarm and ran a quick catalog. Dilated pupils, check. Flushed cheeks, check.

Giant hard-on? Check.

MacGowan noticed the same thing at about the same time, only not in the same guy. T.J. looked where MacGowan looked and was mentally scarred for life. "Oh, you've got to be kidding me."

"I don't think so." MacGowan pressed his fist to his mouth to stop the laughter, though he couldn't hide his huge smirk. "Do you think they have a clue yet?"

"Hard to tell. Uh. So to speak." T.J. rubbed the back of his neck and wished he had the power to wipe his memory. There were certain things he hadn't ever wanted to see. Ever.

MacGowan laughed, delight brightening his unhappy expression and making it something good to look at. "When do you think they'll figure it out?"

Though reluctant, T.J. studied the pair as they raged at the top of their lungs in defense of their friends and came closer to one another with each new wave of their tirades. "Not soon enough."

"That's what I was worried about." MacGowan abruptly slid his hand down T.J.'s arm and took him by the hand. He laced their fingers together. "Want to get out of here while they're distracted?"

T.J. wrinkled his nose. "Why? They'll follow."

MacGowan ignored him. He'd stiffened, drawn up sharp in sudden alarm. "No, don't! Guys, stop it!"

T.J. looked just in time to see Arden draw back as if he'd just been burned and knot his fist. Fist connected with jaw. Fist had all the effect of a glass hammer tapping on concrete. Except it made the concrete mad.

"Son of a bitch—you're going to wish you hadn't done that." Shavey wrestled out of his jacket and rolled up his shirtsleeves.

Arden shook out his hand and pushed into Shavey's space. "Bring it on, big guy. I might be smaller, but I've got teeth."

"He's a hair puller too," T.J. shouted.

Both rounded on him, snarling. "Stay out of this!" They were back in each other's faces before the echoes died away, and this time they meant war. Possibly love and war; it was a toss-up, but either way it was going to be messy.

MacGowan had drawn up inside himself with pent-up frustration. His hands shook, and his face had reddened with anger. "I said, stop!"

They ignored him. "You think you've got what it takes to shut me down, then take your best chance," Arden goaded Shavey.

"Brat, I've got more than enough to put you on your back and keep you there." Shavey loomed over Arden.

T.J. saw Shavey grab Arden's ass. He saw Arden falter, his lips parting in what might have been shock or arousal—no, probably just shock. Didn't matter. MacGowan saw neither of those, only Shavey making an assault on Arden, and that was it for him. *Kersnappety*. T.J. sensed, a half second before it was too late to stop, the pent-up aggression triggering something eldritch and dangerous within MacGowan.

"MacGowan, wait—"

Too late. MacGowan's voice was deeper and shook the ground when he thundered, "*Knock. It. Off.*"

Chapter Eleven

T.J. followed the vibrations up, up, and up, and had a prime view of the railing on the stairs starting to teeter. Heavy railing. It'd plummet down, bash open their heads, and kill them all, which would not only suck, but put a serious damper on their collective love lives.

With one split second in which to act, T.J. didn't think, didn't know what he was doing, but acted. He grabbed MacGowan's hand and absorbed the eldritch shock. Felt like being hit with a foam mallet the size of Texas. He came back from the blow with a yowl. No, more like a caterwaul. And a prickling sensation on his upper lip like...whiskers.

Arden saw all this. And proving himself the better friend, as well as probably suicidally ballsy, took another punch at Shavey. Maybe it was the magic, or maybe he just got lucky, but Shavey went down.

T.J. shuddered and drew it back, pulled it in, felt the erupting whiskers retract and a cold sweat break out over his skin. Arden nodded sharply, once, to the path away from the apartment and mouthed, *Go*.

Shavey made gasping, wheezing noises. Arden cheerfully straddled the big oaf. "Now, how about let's you and me talk this over like civilized men, hmm?"

"He's got it from here," T.J. said. He squeezed MacGowan's hand perhaps a little too tightly, but hey, it captured his attention. "C'mon. I've got better things to do, and coincidentally, they're with you. Up for it?"

MacGowan's relief was a soothing balm to T.J.'s ego. "God, yes. As long as they're anywhere but here."

"Then we're both in luck. C'mon. Follow me."

T.J. ducked behind the forsythia. He'd have to pay the landlord extra for letting these bushes grow wild. He hadn't realized before these past couple of nights what

great cover they made. He beckoned for MacGowan to follow him. Fitting two in the blind spot was a squeeze.

Fortunately for them, neither minded.

MacGowan dropped his forehead to T.J.'s shoulder and rested it heavily there. His shoulders shook. T.J.'s initial alarm faded to... "Are you *laughing*?" he demanded.

"I can't help it." MacGowan kept his voice to a whisper as he brought his head up. Grinning from ear to ear, God help him.

Okay, so T.J. could see the humor too. In a weird, twisted, unholy-love-child-of-Picasso-and-Dali sort of way. *Laugh? I nearly died.* "We have fucking bizarre friends," he confided.

"No kidding." MacGowan rose on tiptoe to peek over the forsythia and whistled quietly. "Whoa."

No way T.J. could hear that and not check it out for himself, though he wished he hadn't. He ducked back down. Dignity forbade him from stuffing his fingers in his ears and chanting "la-la-la." Instead, he got to *hear* Shavey growling, like a bulldog in the throes of passion, "Think you're tough, huh?"

"Tougher than you. The bigger they are —"

"The harder they fall? Bull," Shavey said. A rough scuffling noise and a bitten-off shout of something like pain made T.J. look up to see what was going on.

Ah. Shavey had Arden by the back of the head, a good fistful of hair knotted in his fingers, and crowded Arden's personal space in a way that normally would have resulted in the aggressor having his nose bashed through the back of his skull. Not this time. "Top dog, huh? That's what you think you are? I'll show you different, puppy. Gonna make you come so hard you don't just see stars, you see fucking *planets*."

Arden's mouth fell open. Silently. It was, T.J. suspected, a sign of the impending apocalypse.

MacGowan tugged him back down out of sight. "Scarred for life?" he asked, not unsympathetically.

T.J. rubbed his temples and nodded like a bobblehead doll. "Make the pain stop."

MacGowan's lips were suddenly at his ear, brushing over sensitive skin just beneath. "I thought you'd never ask."

"Wait." T.J. pushed MacGowan just far enough away to run his hand over his cheeks, his chin, and his ears. Everything felt right, nothing feline about him. "This is an ear, right?" he asked, pointing. "A normal human ear?"

MacGowan wrinkled his forehead. "Isn't it supposed to be? Why do you ask?"

"If you have to ask, then I don't need to answer. Forget I said anything."

"What?"

"MacGowan." T.J. took him by the collar, the angle awkward as they stood side by side, but it was the thought that counted. By the way MacGowan's nostrils flared, he figured that worked for MacGowan too. "Shut up and kiss me."

MacGowan was good at taking orders. Extremely, fantastically good, T.J. decided, as he opened his mouth for MacGowan's eager assault. Not to mention limber, the way he writhed around to face T.J. and pinned him to the stair railing. It was like being drowned in forsythia and sex.

There were better ways to go, maybe, but T.J. couldn't have thought of a better one at the moment. He gave way to MacGowan and let him take control the way his body, brain, and inner cat demanded he succumb, and narrowed his world to the heated pressure of MacGowan's lips and the eager, demanding press of MacGowan's hands.

"Right here?" MacGowan asked, lip to lip, sharing T.J.'s breath. "While they're less than five feet away?"

"It's not like they aren't doing the same thing. *Don't tell me if they are.*"

MacGowan knocked foreheads with T.J. and pushed his knee between T.J.'s thighs, giving him something to ride. *Hi-yo, Silver.* "I won't tell you," he said.

"Good." T.J. hitched higher on MacGowan's leg. God, he was addictive. Still a bad idea? You betcha. Did he care even a tiny bit? Nope. He was gonna get him some, and nothing and nobody was going to stand in his way –

Quiet, tuneless whistling cut through the rushing din of their heavy breathing. Sounded like...

T.J. groaned. Just over MacGowan's shoulder, he could see a familiar dark head, boasting truly epic hair tonight, and he could smell the mustiness of old books and dead libraries rolling on before him. Mr. Jontan.

"What?" MacGowan stopped trying to kiss him. He tried to catch T.J.'s eyes. "What's wrong?"

"With you? Nothing. Give me a sec, though, okay? I've got to go see a man about a cat."

"What?" MacGowan tried to crane around to see. "Mr. Jontan's here?"

"Uh, yeah." T.J. thought fast. "If anyone knows what's going on with Buddy, he will. Bet he'll know where Buddy might have run off to hide too."

"I never told you I'd named the cat Buddy," MacGowan said. "How'd you know he got out?"

T.J.'s brain stalled. "Uh..."

"T.J.?"

Hell with it. T.J. took MacGowan by the nape and kissed him with punishing force. He didn't stop until MacGowan whimpered, and didn't let go before he was satisfyingly dazed. "Keep that warm for me. Be right back. I promise."

"Mmph," MacGowan said. He slumped against the railing, hand at his lips and tent in his jeans. "Hurry."

"Quick as greased lightning. I hope. Stay here." T.J. patted MacGowan's cheek to check his balance, prayed he wouldn't fall down or start calling Buddy, which would be incredibly inconvenient, and took off after Mr. Jontan. "Wait up!"

* * * * *

"No," Mr. Jontan said, strolling casually past T.J. when T.J. caught up to him. For a guy who walked slowly, he crossed big distances in small time frames when he wanted to.

T.J.'s legs stopped moving. His hand, which had a mind of its own—in accordance with his upstairs brain, neither of which had the sense God gave a field mouse—flew out to grab Mr. Jontan's arm. "Say that again? 'No,' what? You're supposed to be helping me."

Mr. Jontan regarded T.J.'s hand calmly. No, analytically. Sort of like the way he'd examine an interesting new specimen in a dissecting tray. "If you'd be so kind?" he said in mild warning.

T.J. ordered his fingers to unlock. His fingers refused to cooperate. Hell with it; he'd make this worth his while. "Where were you all day?" He lowered his voice to hiss, "I was Buddy. Are you not getting that? I forgot I was anything but a cat when I was with MacGowan."

"Indeed." Mr. Jontan pried T.J.'s fingers off one by one with the delicate touch of precision steel pincers. "You do realize I was aware."

"So said Arden, who also said you were going to help, so let's see some help already!" T.J.'s hand tingled as if Mr. Jontan had flash-frozen it. His lips, on the other hand, kept flapping. "Tell me what's going on here, Mr. Jontan."

Mr. Jontan considered that. "No," he said. "Now, if you'd let me pass?"

T.J. made a noise he refused to call a squawk and stood his ground.

Mr. Jontan stopped, raised his eyes to heaven, and sighed. "Look, I'm not going to do your homework for you. You're a grown man, and if you can't puzzle it out on your own, I pity you. Besides, as it turns out, you're not the one I need to help."

"No? Sure could have fooled me. And do you want to be any more cryptic? I'm only ninety-nine-point-five percent lost here. Go for that point-five percent. How is MacGowan the one who needs help here?"

Here lies T.J. He could see the tombstone now.

"So you do comprehend that much. Glory be," Mr. Jontan murmured. "A successful deduction. Do be careful not to strain yourself. If you'd only used your head earlier, you might have been of better assistance to the man."

"How could I have helped him when my biggest priorities were tuna fish and catnip? Let me reassure you, those were all I had on my mind when I was stuck as a cat."

"Ah." For the first time during this encounter, Mr. Jontan looked at T.J.'s face. "Quite."

"Forgive me if my wizard-to-English is a little off. Does that mean you're going to help or not?"

Mr. Jontan folded his hands in front of him and pursed his lips. "Help you, no. Help MacGowan? Thinking on the fly, yes, soon. When the time comes."

"And when will that be?" T.J. sneaked a peek over his shoulder at MacGowan, still blissfully stoned and horny among the forsythia.

"When the time is right. That would be why it's called 'the right time.'"

"And if I don't remember I'm human on the inside at the time?"

Mr. Jontan tapped his chin. "There's something so familiar about this... Tell me, T.J. If you are injured in one form, do you remain hurt in the other when you change?"

"What?" T.J. blinked. "I guess so, yeah."

"Good." The ringing slap, open-palmed over his ear, knocked T.J. off balance. The sharp twist to the cartilage brought him upright, teeth clenched against a screech. Mr. Jontan dusted off his hands. "Remember who gave you that, and you should be fine the next time you're tempted to let your feline nature dominate your mind."

T.J. gave up. He wasn't sure he still had an ear. Better to quit while he was ahead. Still had a head. Whatever. "Big help. Thanks a bunch."

"Of course," Mr. Jontan said mildly. "Good luck." He pointed over T.J.'s shoulder and added: "You may want to turn around. I estimate that if you fail to, our dilettante friend Arden will plow you down in three, two, one—"

"*There you are!*" Arden tackled T.J. with an Indian burn to the scalp and a heartier-than-necessary punch to the shoulder. T.J.'s knees, which decided they'd had all they could take in one day, gave way. *Hello, pavement. It's been too long since we last met.*

Arden crouched over him. "That's a bit of an overreaction."

"It's been a long day," T.J. said. It came out sounding like it should rhyme with "fuck off and die." Good.

"Jeez, sorry. You weren't busy or anything, were you?"

"Me? God forbid."

"Are you being sarcastic when I'm in crisis?"

"I think so, yeah. Get out of the way, dickhead, I'm—" T.J. squinted past Arden's giant head to see Mr. Jontan disappearing into the night. "Fuck."

"Yeah. That'd be the problem. We've got to...talk. Now."

An interestingly ominous pause. It would have alarmed T.J. more if he hadn't seen the hickey on Arden's neck. *Uh-oh.* Arden could talk about magic, and everyone else's

sex life until the longhorns came home, but talking about his own relationships came in a close second to the appeal of having his toenails ripped out. Trouble was that once he'd committed to venting, no one was allowed to go anywhere until he'd had his say.

T.J. groaned. He checked to make sure MacGowan was still where he'd been left. He looked less stoned and more blissed out, a fine distinction but there nonetheless. "Fine. Make it quick."

"In summary: I'm up that good old creek." Arden sat and sprawled out beside T.J., a perfect picture of dejected woe.

T.J. shook his head and regretted it. Still, he owed Arden. He'd cowboy up. "I get what you were doing back there, and by the way, thanks, but crazy stuff happens in the heat of the moment. No one's going to make you follow through with a hookup you don't really want, least of all me."

"That's the thing." Arden picked at a fraying hole on the inseam of his jeans. "I don't think I don't want to follow through."

It took T.J. a second to fumble his way through the double negatives. "Say what huh again, now? Last time I checked, you were deafeningly straight."

The glare Arden directed at him would have cut diamonds. "No shit, Sherlock. But me and Shavey, well. You saw us going at it, right?"

Talk about your loaded questions. "Yes?"

"Never had anyone punch back as good as I dished out," Arden said, mixing his metaphors with heedless abandon. "I think I'm turned on."

T.J. tried to picture Shavey with Arden and wished he hadn't, but then again Arden probably hadn't wanted to picture T.J. with MacGowan, and fair was fair. "Then see where it takes you."

"That's the best advice you can give?"

"Do what you need to *and* what you want to. I'm not going to make the choice for you, idiot." T.J. threw his hands up. "If you want to take a ride on the Shavey megalith, go for it. What's the worst that could happen?"

"He'd crush me like a bug."

"There is that." T.J. had to agree. Arden was shorter, skinnier, slighter; the whole thing brought to mind a grizzly bear and a praying mantis. "Actually, that's probable. But would it be worth it?"

Arden frayed the hole in his jeans completely open. "I think so, yeah."

"Huh," T.J. said, nonplussed.

Arden perked up as a new, old-school thought struck him. "And if you never try anything, how're you supposed to know if you like it or not?"

"That's the spirit. I think."

"Except there's no fucking way I'm bottoming." Arden stood and popped his collar. "There are limits."

T.J. eyed him, thought back to Shavey's extreme alpha 'tude, and winced. Yeah, Arden might have a smidgen or two of trouble with Shavey over that one. Not that he'd tell Arden. Tongue firmly in cheek, he mentally saluted Mr. Jontan for being annoyingly right. What came around went around, and Arden had to figure this out for himself.

Damn wizards.

"Good luck with that. Give me a hand up?" T.J. dusted off the ass of his jeans and got MacGowan, still patiently waiting, in his sights. "I have some unfinished business to take care of."

Chapter Twelve

There was a direct correlation between how long it took T.J. to get back to him and how much more uneasy MacGowan became. What with the longer-than-ordinary pause between talking to Mr. Jontan and shepherding Arden through his not-really-a-gay-crisis, by the time T.J. tried to amble casually back to MacGowan as if he hadn't a care in the world, MacGowan had slumped by the door, hands in his pockets and head down.

It'd break Scrooge's heart. T.J. didn't have much trouble drawing some conclusions. MacGowan was confused, freaked out by weirdness he hadn't asked for, and T.J. could only help by making it worse. Super.

T.J. stopped, unconsciously mirrored MacGowan's pose, and cleared his throat. This wasn't fair to MacGowan. Hate it or not, he had the right to the truth. He'd tell MacGowan now. All of it. Like ripping off a Band-Aid. Big ouch, but then it'd be done with.

And then he could go drink himself stupid before going home to wallow in the expanse of his empty bed with one more malt forty to keep him warm.

MacGowan looked up. He softened, sharp edges relaxing and smile reappearing. T.J.'s resolve wavered. "I was starting to wonder if you'd ditched me." The "again" went unspoken but not unheard.

"I wouldn't," T.J. said. "Won't." God help him, that was the truth.

MacGowan brightened. Literally, a lamp clicked on in the apartment behind him that backlit him in a warm amber glow. T.J. didn't think he noticed.

Jeez, talk about a way to tell if a guy was faking or if he was really interested. *Is that a halogen bulb in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?* He coughed. *Resolve: you're doing it wrong.*

"Are you coming down with something?" MacGowan rummaged in his pocket for his keys. "I think I have some cough drops somewhere inside."

T.J. wasn't surprised by the faint rattling tinny clinks he heard behind MacGowan's door. The brownies were probably heave-ho-ing a tin of eucalyptus lozenges across the familiar room. He'd regret saying this, he knew he would, but it came out of his mouth anyway. Funny how that tended to happen around MacGowan. "Do you want to get out of here? I know a place, not far away. Quiet. Peaceful. No interruptions."

A second lamp, brighter, flared to life and gave MacGowan an impromptu halo. It should have been a mood killer. It so wasn't. "I'd love that."

T.J. found a set of keys in his hand without being aware of them having gotten there. "Let's go." He checked the keys. Huh. The magic had a sense of whimsy, James Dean-style. "We'll take Arden's ride."

"What's Arden drive?"

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T.J. killed the engine and stared at his hands, wrapped white-knuckled around the handle grips of Arden's monster of a Harley. At least that was what he thought it was called. He was probably wrong. Arden could wax poetic about the beast for days at a time, but T.J. hadn't ever paid attention. He wished he had. After a spin on the beast, he had a new appreciation for the term "horsepower." Not to mention he now fully understood the term "crotch rocket." *Holy shee-it.*

Behind him, MacGowan shook with the slightly crazed, no doubt wide-eyed glee of a first-time rider. *Rider*, not driver. Not that T.J. thought for a second he'd been driving the crazy thing; it'd been the other way around. The one time he'd tried to take control, the bike had snarled at him and kicked it up to the next gear.

"You okay?" T.J. asked as he pried his fingers loose one by one.

"Are you kidding? I'm fantastic." The pressure of lips, warm and firm, touched T.J.'s nape, and MacGowan's arms tightened roughly around his waist. "Way better than a white horse."

"Thought Prince Charming came riding on the white horse." T.J. twisted to look at MacGowan. "I'm more the court jester. You do realize that, right?"

Seen from this close, MacGowan's eyes were smoky gray and warm with more than excitement from the ride. "You believe what you want. I know what I know." He pressed tight to T.J.'s back to angle for a brush of lips at the corner of T.J.'s mouth.

T.J. sat still, stunned as if someone had just thumped a horse-killing hammer to his forehead. MacGowan grinned at him, impish as a kid in a candy store, and slid off the back of the bike with natural agility. Good God, was he ever nimble. "C'mon. Where's this place you were telling me about?"

"It, uh." T.J. shook himself out of the daze. He spread his hands. "We're here." The bike grumbled in a surly way when he clambered off. "Let me show you."

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"Whoa." MacGowan turned around in a slow circle. He stared at the night sky above them, its mirror image reflected in the small lake that spread out toward the horizon with houselights like fireflies on the far shore. Out here, a half hour's ride on the bike from hell out of town, the stars were brighter and seemed bigger, almost close enough to reach out and touch. Dazzled, MacGowan reached out as if he could pluck one from the sky.

Yeah. Problem is he might actually manage it. T.J. caught MacGowan by the wrist, his mass of bracelets rough to the touch. "That's not all."

"There's more?" MacGowan didn't look away from the sky.

"Ten'll get you twenty there will be," T.J. mumbled. He pulled harder, sought for inspiration, and went with the first thing that popped into his head. "Lie down with me."

That got MacGowan's attention. He had the very stars in his eyes, almost, when he focused on T.J., and unlike the twinkle-twinkles above them, those were the ones that dazzled T.J. "I'd like that."

A tiny flare of impishness was all that warned T.J. before MacGowan folded down and took T.J. with him. Out of all the falls he'd already taken, this should have been one that dealt out twin concussions and a midnight visit to the ER. Instead, not at all to T.J.'s surprise, they landed cozily on their backs. On a soft bed of moss, even, which had not to T.J.'s prior knowledge ever grown out here. They lay side by side, with T.J.'s head on MacGowan's arm, up close and personal.

"See?" T.J. said, trying not to admit how perfectly comfortable this position was. And failing. "Told you there was more."

MacGowan brushed T.J.'s cheek with his forefinger, a light ghost of a touch that made T.J. shiver. Oddly enough, he had no desire to purr. Actually, not odd at all. The cat was the furthest thing from MacGowan's mind right now.

T.J. decided he could roll with that.

"So about Shavey," MacGowan said, his chin tucked atop T.J.'s head, not pointy or bony but comfortable.

As pillow talk, not so much the norm. "Yeah?" T.J. asked warily. He peered up at MacGowan.

The highest angle of MacGowan's cheeks glowed red. "He means well. Don't let him scare you off."

Not that T.J. would have, but he was fairly certain he wouldn't have been able to. Not when MacGowan commanded otherwise. Lucky him, he didn't mind. This time. "What's his deal, anyway?"

"I told you I'd made mistakes. Shavey says..." MacGowan sighed. "He's been around for years, and he tells me I fall for guys too fast, and I have a weird knack for picking total dicks."

T.J. winced.

"I told you, you're different," MacGowan said, nudging T.J. with his elbow. "I don't know how I know. I just do."

Ah, hell. T.J. tried to extricate himself. "You barely know me at all."

"I wouldn't say that." MacGowan coaxed T.J. back down with the lightest of pulls. "We got to know each other better than most last night."

T.J. intended to say, *We fucked; it's not the same*, but the lie died before he could shape it on his lips. He exhaled heavily and tucked his head more comfortably on MacGowan's chest. "Yeah," he said, gazing up at the sky. "We did."

He couldn't tell MacGowan the truth. Fuck it, he couldn't. One more night. What could one more night hurt? Oh, and hey, here was a thought: he'd plant Mr. Jontan's card in MacGowan's apartment. Doodle on a hat with stars and moons and a magic wand, and write CALL ME on the back.

Perfect. Nothing left to get in the way of enjoying his night out not-on-the-town, just the way MacGowan—and he—wanted. T.J. sighed, content, and curled closer to MacGowan. *Yes. Perfect.*

Inexplicably, instead of reaching for T.J. to kiss him or grope him or anything else expected in a situation like this, MacGowan smiled broad and bright.

T.J. raised himself on one elbow and prodded MacGowan in the softer skin of his—okay, the nickel-bouncing firmness of his stomach. "Share the joke?"

The bashful way MacGowan bit his lip deflated any faux indignity T.J. might have been able to summon up—nah, like he could have managed *that* when MacGowan was next to him, MacGowan's scent of warm male body and night air gagging and hog-tying T.J.'s dignity. "Sorry. Lying here, like this, it reminded me of the first time I went parking with someone."

T.J. settled back down and threw one leg over MacGowan's, tucking his ankle between MacGowan's feet. "And?"

MacGowan tickled his back. "And you seriously want to hear about this?"

"Sounds like you don't want to tell me, which means it was embarrassing, so hell yes, I do. Spill."

"You're a mean, bad man." MacGowan stroked T.J.'s back, slow, tingling sweeps of his hand that made T.J. shiver. "Only if you tell me something embarrassing about yourself too."

T.J. clamped his mouth shut on, *I'm a cat*, before shrugging. "I'm game." He hadn't meant to say *that*, either. Crap. Still, fair was fair... "You go first."

"Mmm," MacGowan said. He focused on the sky. "I grew up in Iowa. Corn country. Not much else to do on weekend nights, nowhere to go that wasn't a Dairy

Queen, but the upside was that if you wanted to sneak off with someone, all you had to do was pick a field with enough cover and you were set."

"Which you took advantage of?"

"Just the one time." The steady sweeps of MacGowan's hand on T.J.'s back slowed until it was barely the rub of his thumb.

T.J. grimaced. "If it's that bad, you don't have to tell."

"No." MacGowan set his jaw. "I said I would, and I keep my word, okay?"

"Okay, okay." T.J. held up one hand, palm out in surrender. T.J. knew he'd have to think of something really nightmarish to make MacGowan feel like his wasn't as awful as the lead-in indicated.

Fortunately, or not, he didn't have to dig too deep. Nothing like accidentally giving the first jock you fucked under the bleachers a case of cat scratch fever to scar the teenage psyche for life.

Then again, it'd help to have a story he could actually share. Bah, he'd think of something. *Okay, moving on.* "I'm listening," T.J. said. "This person you went parking with—"

"There wasn't a car involved so much as there was a tractor."

"Yee-haw."

"Shut up." MacGowan laughed. It did good things for him. And for T.J., who absorbed the seismic ripples of MacGowan's shaking body. The friction did even better things for his already half-hard cock.

T.J. wriggled. "Go on."

MacGowan raised an eyebrow, for good reason. No one with a working sense of touch could have missed the pressure of T.J.'s dick on his hip. He ran his thumbnail down the center of T.J.'s back, his grin almost devilish when T.J. shivered. "There isn't that much to tell. Starry night, like that Van Gogh painting. We'd had a couple of beers. There was always some bored just-legal to buy for you. Out in the field, dirt in our hair. He had his pants down, so did I, and we were fooling around."

"I'm not hearing the bad so far," T.J. said cautiously.

"I blew him. While I jerked myself off. I don't remember if it was great or not. I was sixteen. Didn't take much; I'd probably have come if the breeze had changed directions, let alone lasted more than five seconds when I had a cock in my mouth for the first time."

"That was it?" T.J. shifted his weight and tried to adjust himself. God, if he'd been the one with MacGowan way back when, both young, both hot to trot, he wouldn't have stopped there.

MacGowan was silent for a long minute. "No. I swallowed, and then I threw up."

"Ouch."

"Because, I found out later, he'd eaten asparagus and broccoli topped with chili peppers."

"Damn." T.J. had a bad feeling about this.

"Then he pinned me down with a knee to the chest and wrote COCKSUCKER on my forehead in permanent marker."

T.J. wondered if he could get a name. An address. If he had enough money to hire a hit man. It'd be worth every penny. There were bad first times, and then there were nightmares. Worse still, he didn't think MacGowan was done yet. "Please tell me that was all."

"I—" MacGowan shut his mouth with an audible *click*. In that moment, T.J. knew what'd happened, or had a good idea. Lightning had probably scorched the bastard's bare ass, or maybe fire ants had feasted on his dick. Possibly he'd face-planted in cornfield mud and hopefully fertilizer. Something had happened that MacGowan couldn't have—or wouldn't have wanted to—explain.

Brownies in the cornfield? That'd make a hell of a horror film. Or not.

He nosed MacGowan's shoulder. "It's okay," he said and stroked MacGowan's chest. "I get the picture." More than. He couldn't help but admire MacGowan's inner strength. After a knockdown like that, it'd take a strong man to come back to the point where he could hit on his upstairs neighbor.

Faint inspiration struck. "For what it's worth, I, uh, got some hairs up my nose, sneezed, and almost bit the dick off the first guy I blew," T.J. offered. True enough, though they'd been *his* hairs. Tabby hairs.

MacGowan chuckled. "That's bad."

"T.J. Bobbitt. It doesn't have a great ring to it."

MacGowan ruffled T.J.'s hair. "Thanks," he said, though it wasn't the same and they both knew as much. "Anyway. For a long time after that, until I moved to California" — MacGowan was beautifully pink — "I didn't bother trying again."

"And on the beaches, you...?"

"I, everything." MacGowan's smirk was sufficiently dirty enough to impress T.J., right before it dimmed. "But no one ever stayed, you know? I get that summer flings are just that: flings. Right? I just kept wanting them to be more. And the more I wanted it, the dumber I got about picking and choosing." MacGowan didn't sound sorry for himself, only resigned and wistful, and T.J. didn't know which was worse. "That's where I met Shavey. Shavey was interested, but then he punched out some guy who was about to roofie me —"

"Someone *what*?" T.J. struggled upright. He owed Shavey an apology. And a bottle of scotch. And Arden on a silver platter, if that was what Shavey wanted. The way things seemed to be turning out, Arden would probably hop gleefully on with a sprig of garnish clenched between his teeth. Freakin' spooky how Arden-the-straight had fallen so hard for Shavey.

T.J. hadn't realized he was nearly upright, stewing and thinking hard enough for smoke to billow from his ears before MacGowan rose to push him back down. "They didn't get as far as spiking my drink," MacGowan said to calm him. "Shavey got there first. After that, he figured I was his responsibility. He's been looking out for me ever since. Mostly by e-mail, but now that we don't live too far apart again..." He trailed off. "It's good to see him, you know? Good to have someone watch my back."

Something snapped inside T.J. "Hey." He turned fully on his side, even if it meant he had to untangle their legs, and put his hand to MacGowan's cheek. "That makes two of us keeping an eye out for you."

"Even better." MacGowan covered T.J.'s hand with his own. "Because it's you." He slid his arm over T.J. and eased them closer together, chest to chest. T.J. watched MacGowan come closer, unable to look away even when MacGowan's eyelashes tickled his cheek, when MacGowan's lips fastened firm and warm on his.

T.J. knew he shouldn't say what he wanted to, but didn't care. "And because I'm yours," he said, and meant it. For something like this, he didn't mind eating a little humble pie. It was worth it to see the sun dawn in MacGowan's eyes, and it felt *good* to let this happen. Things were as they should be, in perfect alignment, and nothing could go wrong tonight. He wouldn't let it.

Chapter Thirteen

"Whatever you want, MacGowan," he said as he traced the line from MacGowan's sternum to just above his belt buckle. "I'm serious. All you have to do is ask. Climbing rivers, swimming trees, you name it."

MacGowan shivered, a full-body ripple as sensual as a siren in top form, and far more erotic. His hard cock slid roughly against T.J.'s as he licked T.J.'s lips. "Then I want you to fuck me," he said, soft and low and raw-edged with hunger. "Wanted it since the first time I saw you."

"MacGowan—" T.J. started, the breath knocked out of him.

"If you meant what you said, then do it." MacGowan cupped T.J.'s cock through his jeans. "Fuck me now."

T.J.'s hand was on MacGowan's chest. He was applying pressure. Clearly, he had meant to push MacGowan back and away. Funny how it didn't seem to be working.

"Easy, cowboy," he said. "What happened to courtship?"

MacGowan wrinkled his nose. "We barbecued and went for a ride in the country. On a motorbike."

Fair enough.

The back of T.J.'s head hit the velvety moss beneath them, as well as the truly hard and highly unforgiving solid earth under that. Small fireworks exploding in his vision distracted him from MacGowan. Either not one of his wisest moves, giving in to the *ow*, or one of the best. Cool air ghosted over his abdomen as MacGowan slid his shirt up to expose bare skin, and heated liquidity followed in the form of openmouthed kisses trailed up to the heart and down to the belt.

T.J.'s fingers were in MacGowan's hair. Knotted tight. Clearly, the idea was to yank sharply enough to get MacGowan's attention. Strange; that didn't seem to work either. MacGowan swirled the tip of his tongue in T.J.'s navel. T.J.'s toes curled. "Wait."

He licked his lips and tried to raise himself on his elbows. "MacGowan, cut it out—*not literally*—"

"Why?" MacGowan asked, his body draped over T.J.'s leg, his hands everywhere, his lips following after. He hooked his fingers in T.J.'s belt and looked up at him, smoky-dark, his pupils dilated wide and his skin flushed.

T.J. understood, now, what it was that drew moths to flame. Even if they knew they'd burn, the fire called to them and they couldn't not be what they were, couldn't not do what they'd been made for: following the fire. The bit of MacGowan that had claimed T.J. pushed at him, insisted gently, and T.J. could not but give in and sigh with the relief, like the first drink of water after seven days dry.

Drinking stars. That was what the guy who'd invented champagne had said the first time he'd gotten it right. T.J. understood that now too.

"I talk too much," T.J. said. "Carry on."

MacGowan dimpled at him, laughed, ducked his head, and got to business. T.J. couldn't see but could sense just fine the pressure of MacGowan's hard-on somewhere in the vicinity of his shin. Not usually where those ended up. T.J. lost a few seconds to pondering the relative kinkiness of ankle sex, and somewhere in there, MacGowan moved down to breathe over T.J.'s cock, doing its best to stand at attention behind his fly.

"What are you—*oh*, fuck." T.J.'s grip on MacGowan's hair, ebony-sepia twined around his fingers, tightened and tugged. Not that he cared; not that he hoped MacGowan cared, not when MacGowan's mouth was open, wide and wet, his tongue a dark, smoldering pressure, mouthing his cock through his jeans. He hummed to himself, a sensual purring nontune, and made his way up a suck at a time, his hand following after to knead the moistened denim and the swollen flesh beneath. Rough, hot, relentless. T.J. tossed, turned, writhed, arched his back under the brilliant torture, and wondered if this was what a blowjob from him felt like when he used his rough cat's tongue.

If so, if it weren't for MacGowan, who he wouldn't trade for a king's ransom, T.J. would have had to go find himself another tomcat, because, *damn*.

"Fuck me," MacGowan said. He delicately lapped over T.J.'s cockhead, still trapped inside his jeans but doing its absolute best to drill its way out. "I can ask nicer if you want."

Any "nicer" and T.J. wouldn't survive. And yet—"Rather you fucked me," he said as he knuckle-rubbed MacGowan's head to keep him going. *No stopping with the mouth. Mouth good.*

"No." MacGowan's jaw set in a stubborn way. He grazed his bared, clenched teeth over the spot where T.J.'s happy trail disappeared into his jeans. Nuzzled him and climbed fully between T.J.'s legs.

T.J. rubbed his temple, his forehead, shaky strokes that faltered when MacGowan sneaked a lick beneath his belt and *just* grazed his cockhead. "Point of argument. You're

already there," he said, almost breathless. "Want you in me again." He clamped his thighs around MacGowan's shoulders. So what if he'd have to let go to get his jeans off? He'd made his point.

Which MacGowan ignored. "Uh-uh." He palmed T.J.'s cock and sucked at his navel. "You promised, last time."

"I did?" T.J. tried to think. Not easy; it got harder—ahem—by the second. "It's not my place."

MacGowan popped up. He looked perplexed. "Say that again?"

T.J. shut his mouth and kept it shut. He had no idea where that'd come from. Definitely not him. Possibly from the cat, or, no, cats were selfish bastards and he knew that for a fact. From something deeper than the cat, something earthbound, almost elemental. "Mmm-mmm," he verbalized instead and used the strength in his legs to haul MacGowan closer and tighter. He canted his hips invitingly and reached for MacGowan to bring him down to earth.

MacGowan stayed put. He took T.J.'s hands and positioned them at his waist. "Your place is anywhere I want you to be," he said. It was there in MacGowan's words too, the not-quite-earthly command, the note no one could deny, not for any reason.

T.J.'s body went limp and lax, except for his cock, which most definitely did *not*. A shock of cooler air made him gasp; a slide of liquid on his lower belly drew him to look down and see, as well as feel, that he'd gotten so hard his cockhead peeked out insistently from the waist of his jeans.

MacGowan was on it in a flash, suckling hard. He released T.J. all too soon with an obscene *pop* and looked at him through the eyes of a devil and an angel both. "You know you want to. I want you to."

A thought struck T.J., and he began to laugh, and once he'd started, he couldn't stop. He threw his arm over his face and shook with mirth.

MacGowan nipped the soft skin beneath his navel in warning. "What?"

T.J. got himself under control—barely—and reached down to push MacGowan's hair off his cheeks. "I didn't plan ahead. Didn't think to... Bet you didn't bring anything either." Hope sprang eternal. "Did you?"

"Sorry. Nothing." MacGowan licked thoughtfully around the swollen crown of T.J.'s cock. His gaze darkened further still, a black light of challenge gleaming in their depths. In the moonlight and the shadows, he looked nothing like a human, but better than all the rest. "Doesn't mean we can't have fun, does it? Use your imagination."

Maybe it was a word of command, or maybe it was knowing MacGowan wasn't going to let up until T.J. was buried balls-deep in him. Both had a hell of a motivating factor going for them. T.J. struggled up, hands braced behind him, and sought MacGowan's mouth for a kiss. Their lips clung, lingered; tongues flickered, teased; they drew away only to return.

Somewhere in there, MacGowan's fly came open. He might have done it, or MacGowan might have willed it. He didn't know and didn't care, because once it was out of the way he found MacGowan's cock and groped his turgid length. The flesh thrummed, surged in his hand, so eager. Begging for it. He wet his fingertip in the beads of precum that escaped MacGowan and drew a line from side to side above a sticky patch on his lower stomach. "Got an idea," T.J. said.

"Hoped you would." MacGowan nipped T.J.'s lower lip, drew it between his, and sucked.

T.J.'s cock surged. "I haven't topped in years," he confessed in a sudden rush. "Since, uh, never."

Most guys would have faltered, and many would have changed their minds. None of them were MacGowan, who fumbled his way to opening T.J.'s jeans and hooking his cock out, naked and hard. He squeezed the shaft and milked precum from him. "So I get to be your first. Good." He bit the tip of T.J.'s nose and then retreated in a great tumble to fall and sprawl on his back, legs open in invitation. His cock jutted high and thick. "Get creative."

T.J.'s head spun even as his mouth watered. "I've had this fantasy," he said. He followed MacGowan up and over onto his knees, took MacGowan's jeans by the hips, and slid them down off his legs.

MacGowan stretched one firm, bare leg at a time, not ashamed, and raised his arms to have his shirt taken off too. "What kind of fantasy?"

"Turn over?" T.J. asked, hoarse.

MacGowan cut him one darkly smoldering look, tongue flicking over his lips, and rolled as smooth as a wave to his stomach.

"You don't even want to hear it?" T.J. asked. He found his place on his knees and pulled MacGowan's hips up.

"No. Whatever it is, just do it." MacGowan spread his knees for balance and rested his weight on his forearms. His pert, tight ass was the highest part of him, spread out at just the right angle to—

"You asked for it," T.J. warned. He palmed MacGowan's ass cheeks, pulled them apart, and pressed his face between. Senses flooded with MacGowan's scent of masculine skin and sweat, he licked.

MacGowan shouted and jerked forward, away, then thrust back and shuddered, keened, begged for more without words. T.J. couldn't have stopped if he'd said no. He drew his tongue over MacGowan's hole, teased with tiny licks, then thrust his tongue inside and stroked as deep as he could.

He pulled out, once, for the fun of hearing MacGowan snarl and beg, and to tell him, "Touch yourself. For me. Hard, fast, don't stop. Want to feel you come with my tongue in you."

MacGowan groaned, a deep and grinding sound from deep inside his chest, and though he had to take all his weight on one arm, he did as he'd been told, his hand almost a blur on his engorged cock. T.J. burrowed deep, tongue curled and pointed to go as deep as possible, the skin glossy with saliva and the tremors that racked MacGowan bearing down around him.

"T.J., close—" MacGowan hissed. "Can't stop it—are you—"

One more lick, one deep thrust, and T.J. withdrew to bite MacGowan's ass cheek. "Do it," he said, drunk with the power. "Get yourself off. No, wait, no—" Spit wouldn't be enough, but he knew where to get something more to ease the way.

Moving with a tree trunk jutting between his legs, not easy, but T.J. managed it. He writhed onto his back and between MacGowan's thighs. Confused, MacGowan knelt up, poised above him. His hand stilled. "What are you—"

"You'll see." T.J. fought his jeans open while he looked up at MacGowan, and at MacGowan's leaking hard-on so ready to explode. Drops of MacGowan's sweat fell on his chin, fat and salty. Then a thicker, viscous bead of precum drooled over his lips. He licked it off eagerly and watched MacGowan reel when he got the idea. Beautiful.

"Really?" MacGowan took his cock, so needy and dark, in hand. "God, you—"

T.J. forced eye contact though MacGowan was so beautifully drunk on sex, his mouth strung open and his breath rasping. "Come in my mouth." He parted his lips like a bird begging for food and stroked the soft inner skin of MacGowan's thighs. Balanced the fullness of MacGowan's balls on his thumbs. "Move your hand. Squeeze it. Bring it. Want it." Couldn't suck him, not after what he'd just done, but he could, if MacGowan would—

MacGowan groaned and tipped forward, one hand slammed to earth and one moving ruthlessly on his cock. *Unh, unh, unh* noises escaped him, timed with jerks of his hips, precum stuttering from him. T.J. kept each drop and stored it under his tongue, and begged for more with wordless murmurs and the press of his thumbs to MacGowan's balls.

Finally—too soon, way too soon; he could have spent all night there, with MacGowan strung out over him—MacGowan growled low and feral, curved his back in a high arch, and came in T.J.'s mouth. Worked his cock until he had to take his hand away from the too-sensitive skin, still half-hard; the last drops trickled over T.J.'s chin. He was a wreck, hair plastered to his face, chest heaving in great sucks of air, shaking in every muscle.

T.J. had to grab his cock and squeeze not to come. No way had he pushed as far as seeing the finish line just to quit now. Though his cheeks bulged with spunk, he pushed insistently at MacGowan's chest to tip him over and back. It was about as difficult as tipping over a blade of grass.

With MacGowan on his back, T.J. crawled between his legs and delicately, carefully, let his mouthful of cooling spunk drool out into the palm of his hand. He licked the inside of his mouth to savor the taste and smeared MacGowan's hole with the

cum, fingering him deep and scissoring his fingers wide. "Creative enough for you?" he asked.

MacGowan dug his heels into the small of T.J.'s back. "Fuck me *now*," he barked as he fucked himself on T.J.'s fingers. He pinched and twisted his nipples, writhed, was a mad, wild thing made of shadow and light, and be damned if T.J. could wait another second.

"Your wish," he said, crawling to his knees and hitching MacGowan's legs higher on his hips, poising his cock at MacGowan's needy hole, "my command."

He slid inside.

MacGowan opened for him the way T.J. had read about, sometimes, and scoffed at. Sex was fucking hard. Um. Fuck it; sex wasn't *easy*, not like this. It was sweating and swearing and straining to make things fit; it was worrying about *do they like this* or *am I good enough*.

Not this time. Not with MacGowan. Fucking MacGowan was everything sex was supposed to be. And better. MacGowan's eyes were squeezed shut and his mouth open in a tight O. Tendons stood out in the strained arc of his neck; he dug his fingers in the moss and rent long furrows through the soft green, and his cock rose from half-hard to fully engorged, red and sore or not.

T.J. couldn't bend over to kiss him, not like this, but God, did he want to. Stinging, salty sweat dripped into his eyes. He could barely move, could think of nothing else but *deeper, harder, faster*. Until MacGowan grasped his renewed hard-on, thrust into his hand, and shouted, hoarse and wrecked. Then there was only moving. The give of MacGowan's thigh muscles beneath his hold, the play of light over MacGowan's chest and face, rutting grunts and slick slapping of balls against ass.

MacGowan swallowed, a wrenching jerk of his throat, and hoarsely began to chant. Mostly things that made no sense, but what T.J. did hear, even in the faraway place he'd retreated to inside his head, hit him harder than dropping acid. God, yeah; he could hear with his closed eyes and see the rich, ripe scent of fucking, and taste the night air. Fur rippled down his back in waves that rose and fell, here now, then gone, and back again; his nails lengthened halfway to claws and smoothed out. His teeth were sharper, fang-keen, when he bit at the inside of his cheek.

Dangerous. Too risky. He couldn't stop. Not even if he'd wanted to. He dragged MacGowan higher, harder up on his cock. *Almost there – almost* – it waited the tiniest breath out of reach, at the fine-strung point a guy could wish would last forever if it weren't for the best part still to come.

T.J. drank in the sight of MacGowan spitted and writhing on his cock. Made him feel a million miles long and big, fucking him so hard he'd remember it for days every time he moved. Made him feel like a lion, not a tabby, not a man. He kept his mouth shut, or otherwise he might have roared. He knew he wanted to.

MacGowan grasped at him, moss and red dirt buried beneath his nails, and scored T.J.'s flesh instead. "Waited for this," he gritted between clenched teeth, "wanted it, so

much, so fucking much, you don't know — *God*, more — wanted you the first time I saw you, *fuck*, need you, want you, falling so hard for you, I swear I already am — ”

T.J.'s teeth sank into the meat of his lip. He tasted blood when he came, his own, salty and sweet, flowing in as he shot inside MacGowan. Time slowed to rising and falling sweeps, not countable on any clock, each minute or hour a twisting wave of orgasm that filled MacGowan with his spunk until he was empty and then, then, then he fell, crashing to rest atop MacGowan.

He came to himself seconds or minutes or days later—he didn't know and didn't care—to find his cheek plastered to MacGowan's chest and MacGowan's heart thundering beneath his ear. “Can I get an amen?”

“Depends.” MacGowan feathered a light, exhausted touch through T.J.'s matted hair. “Can I get an encore?”

T.J. didn't have to think twice about that. He crawled up MacGowan's body and kissed the corner of his mouth, his temple, and would have aimed for his lips if his muscles hadn't given out. “Anytime.”

MacGowan's lips curved into a smile, the dimple perfect for T.J. to nuzzle. Took a hell of a lot of effort not to purr, but he managed. “I meant what I said,” MacGowan murmured, sleepy. T.J. liked knowing that about MacGowan; come once—okay, twice—and he was out like a light. Cute quirk. “Don't know how I got so lucky. This place, you, a chance to go back to school, you, the cat I wanted to adopt—maybe I can coax Mr. Jontan to let me have him. He's awesome; you'd love him. I want to keep him. And then, I have you.”

T.J. kept quiet on the outside, but on the inside his mind raced against a tide of molasses.

MacGowan tweaked T.J.'s ear and yawned jaw-crackingly loud. “You don't have to say anything. Don't even have to feel it. It's okay.”

T.J. tapped MacGowan's breastbone in thought, then decided thinking was far overrated sometimes. He had one of Mr. Jontan's cards in his wallet. Earlier than he'd planned, he could sneak it into MacGowan's pocket once MacGowan was asleep. MacGowan would find it, call the number, and they could get on with their lives. Together. Man, cat, whatever; didn't matter to him as long as he could keep this thing they had between them. Whatever came next? He'd deal. Done and done.

Which meant there was no reason not to feed the words he wanted to say into MacGowan's mouth with a kiss: “Yeah, well. Fuck that noise. I'll feel it, and I'll say it too.”

Chapter Fourteen

T.J. woke in a rush and with a sense of spatial disorientation that insisted on telling him he was too small for his body. He squinted against the flood of annoyingly cheerful sunlight in his eyes and curled his lip. Fucking sun. It came up too early. Someone ought to do something about that.

Generally, whenever a guy woke feeling dazed and confused, he did the usual checks, and T.J. wasn't about to be the exception who proved the rule. All limbs present and accounted for? Good. Downstairs brain and the twins? Hard to tell.

T.J. sighed. The tip of his tail, previously wrapped around his paws, twitched playfully in front of his nose as if to say good morning. *Figures.*

Not that he was any too surprised. Go to sleep as a man, wake as a cat; it was getting to be par for the course. Oddly enough, he didn't think he minded. If lunacy could be predicted, then it was surprising what a guy could deal with. Wasn't so bad, this whole gig. His semester away from teaching meant he wouldn't have to call in feline to work, and though the sun deserved a good scratching with four paws' worth of claws for existing, it did feel good, warm, and comforting on his fur.

Yep, T.J. decided, if I've gotta live in a fairy tale, it could be a hell of a lot worse.

For one thing, there weren't any birdies chirping a three-part harmony "good morning to you" at the window. If there were, he'd have had to shoot them.

T.J. examined his claws and licked his paw in thought. Maybe not *shoot*, per se. More like *hunt*. He could taste the feathers between his teeth now. *I tawt I taw a snack.*

Speaking of which, his stomach rumbled right on cue. Some things being traditional, T.J. took adequate time to stretch each leg in turn and to twist and lick his shoulder before he hopped out of his bed, where he'd gone to sleep the previous night, alone. It'd hurt to part ways after coming back from the great outdoors, but he'd claimed Arden would be out for blood when he found they'd taken his bike, and it was

better if MacGowan avoided the fallout. True enough as it went, and there was no sense in spoiling perfectly good afterglow with ball-numbing panic over morphic difficulties. Wouldn't have to teach *him* that lesson twice. Three times. Whatever.

Pleased with himself, T.J. trotted toward the window he'd left open and nimbly navigated his way up and through. Or at least that'd been the idea.

Hmm. Smaller than I'd thought. T.J. wriggled his head back out of the gap and studied his exit route. Floating shoulder blades and extra vertebrae meant this wasn't a problem he usually encountered. Not to mention he knew exactly how much room he needed and had planned ahead. Which meant someone was screwing with him.

It was a paranoid-bastard jump to conclusions, but he wasn't wrong. A cross-breeze that carried the stink of five-day-old garbage, two-day-old mouse carcass, and nice fresh malice proved his point. Below the window, where he'd been keeping it pinned with an admittedly surprisingly clever arrangement of a stick wedged into place, Sur Lune snickered at T.J. as only a cat could. Interestingly enough, it worked just as well on another cat as it would on a human.

T.J. bared his teeth. *"I'm not in the mood for this, dickhead. Let me out."* Not so much thoughts as minute body language signals—a flick of the ear here, a subsonic growl there—but he got his point across.

Sur Lune sneered. *"Fuck you"* came across no problem to anyone in any language.

"I said, let me out." T.J. dug at the too-small gap in the window. No one with any sense would ever leave a cat without an exit strategy. It tended to get ugly fast. Curtains usually didn't survive, and he *liked* those curtains. *"Out!"*

"Why? Got somewhere to be?" Sur Lune settled on his haunches and slurped at his forepaw. His yellow-green eyes gleamed with petty enjoyment.

Huh. It was rare for Sur Lune to bother with anything more than *fuck you*, and then repeating it for emphasis as need be. *"I want to get to – never mind. I want out."* T.J.'s tail rapped the handy climbable bookcase beneath him, *rat-a-tat-tat*.

Sur Lune shrugged. *"So what? Gotta get where, house cat?"* He smirked, which came surprisingly easily to any cat, laced with an extra dose of psychotic glee. *"Gotta go sniff your wizard's balls?"*

"You're a pig," T.J. retorted. He refused to care how ludicrous that insult was. *"Yeah. I want to be with him."* And he really, really did. Like a focused point of sunlight at the back of his neck that needled deeper and deeper once he'd acknowledged it, the need to be with MacGowan was well on its way to driving him nicely nuts. *"Let me out!"* He wailed for emphasis, a cat's howl of displeasure, and resigned himself to the loss of his curtains.

Sur Lune's ear swiveled; aside from that, he pretended not to notice, too busy grooming himself. There were things caught between his toes T.J. didn't want to think about, not that he had a choice with Sur Lune slurping himself clean like he was at a blowjob competition. *"Cockwhipped,"* Sur Lune remarked between juicy, slobbering licks.

"It's getting less tempting by the second," T.J. said.

"Led around by the dick, and all for a pretty face with a soft hand and a cabinet full of tuna," Sur Lune scoffed. "Pathetic."

T.J. considered that. *"Are you stoned? What more could a cat want?"*

Sur Lune abandoned his quest for debris so abruptly T.J. knew he'd struck a nerve. *"Freedom,"* he said, whiskers a-bristle. *"Not that you'd know what that means. You'd be happy to be owned by that penny-ante magic-maker, wouldn't you?"*

Stung, T.J. laid his ears flat against his skull. *"So what if I would?"*

"You don't have a clue," Sur Lune said with a phlegmy snort of disdain. *"You don't even want one. You're still human enough to be an idiot."*

"Being human isn't a bad thing." T.J. tried to remember what Sur Lune had looked like back when he was in human shape, but what with all those pictures burned and so many years gone by, he had only a vague memory of someone tall and dark with a rogue's grin and a wicked sense of cunning. He still had one out of three going for him, anyway. *"What do you want?"*

Sur Lune stilled. *"I don't want anything. Just here to have some fun watching the clue-by-four bash your head while you're still too stupid to get it."* He stretched carelessly, neck to tail, and headbutted the stick out of the way. *"Go play with your wizard. What do I care?"*

T.J. waited for Sur Lune to retreat before he wriggled through the window and jumped to the tree across, from which it was an easy hop to the stairs. He looked back, of course. Looking back was written in everyone's DNA, man or animal or gastropod.

Sur Lune flipped up his tail.

What does he know? T.J. scoffed. *This is a good life. I'm going to enjoy what I've got, because it's more than most ever get to dream of, fuck you very much, Sur Lune.*

He nimble-toed it down the steps, head high, pleased with himself, and plunked in neat Bast-pose before MacGowan's doorstep to announce himself with a loud meow. That felt good. Right. Like coming home.

And MacGowan opening the door to look down at him with a delighted grin lighting his face? *That* felt fucking fantastic.

* * * * *

MacGowan, being the obliging sort, was more than happy to bring his design equipment and hanks of raveled hemp outside and to sit cross-legged in the sun with T.J. sprawled in his lap. Every so often MacGowan would stop to study his work, whereupon T.J. purred and wriggled to remind MacGowan there were more important things to do, e.g., scratch the cat's ears. If you asked him, it didn't get any closer to heaven than this.

"Thought I'd find you here," a man said, accompanied by a vast and bulky shadow that blocked out the sun.

T.J. writhed from back to belly and hooked his claws in MacGowan's jeans—not flesh—and growled quietly. Shavey. Natch. It didn't get any closer to hell than this.

MacGowan, on the other hand, looked up with a hand shading his eyes and grinned. "I wondered when you'd come around again. You could have called."

"I hate cell phones. Mind if I sit?"

MacGowan shrugged, easy and graceful and careless. "Mi stairs es su stairs. What's up?"

"Not much," Shavey replied. He knotted his hands together and squeezed.

T.J. snorted. *I'll groom Sur Lune myself if that's not a lie. What's he want?*

Didn't look like MacGowan was fooled either. He put his hemp aside and rested his chin on his hand. "Do I have to wheedle it out of you? We both know how that'll end up. You'll cave like a mining accident."

T.J. purred. *Nice one.* Better still, it worked. Colors tended to look different to cats, but he deduced that Shavey was blushing, and that it didn't do anything good for his face.

"Guy problems," Shavey grumbled at last.

T.J. stiffened. So did MacGowan. "Not again. How many times do I have to tell you, T.J.'s—"

Shavey cut him a look sharp enough to cut glass and disgusted enough to put a grande dame of society to shame. "Believe it or not, this isn't about you."

MacGowan chuffed a quiet laugh. "Fair enough. So then..." His glee felt, to T.J., like a sudden spray of soda through his veins. "Arden? *You're* the one with guy troubles? I knew he was too much for you to handle!"

Shavey switched to a plain, murderous glare. "Are you going to be serious about this or what?"

"Me? I'm as sober as a judge." The restrained quake of MacGowan's muscles as he fought to hold back his amusement was a dead giveaway, to T.J. at least, who settled in to purr and to enjoy this for all it was worth.

Which naturally meant that Shavey would fidget—it looked awesomely awkward on a guy the approximate size of two fullbacks smashed together—and lift his chin at T.J. "Could you not, with the cat?" He gestured vaguely but with a clear meaning: *please make the cat go away.* "He freaks me out."

An ailurophobe? Interesting. T.J. smirked at Shavey and purred louder.

Until MacGowan lifted him off his lap and patted his rump. "Go on, boy. You can go inside." He'd left the door open exactly wide enough to allow a cat entrance and exit, with bowls of cool water and surprisingly tasty kibble just past the entryway. T.J. could use a snack. It'd been half an hour since he'd last had a nibble.

Like hell was he missing any of *this*, though. He chirruped a *see-what-a-good-kitty-I-am?* to MacGowan and trotted past. To his satisfaction, Shavey ignored him as soon as

he was out of sight, and T.J. plunked down just behind the door to listen to his heart's content. Revenge tasted far better than tuna.

"Okay, so about Arden." MacGowan lifted one shoulder. "What's the problem? He's cute, I guess, he's interested—at least I thought he was—and he's up for a good time. I thought that was what you liked."

"That is. He is. I don't know, MacGowan. There's something about him."

T.J. sighed. *We are the last of the true great poets, aren't we?*

"You need to give me more than that to go on," MacGowan said. His eyebrows lifted. "Unless he's too good to be true. Wait. That's it, isn't it? You actually *like* him, don't you?"

Shavey's face turned an interesting color. "Hold on a cotton-picking second, I didn't say —"

"You do!" MacGowan bounced with the delicious glee of anyone, male or female, when they sensed one of their fellows giving in to the charms of another. In these cases, hypocrisy didn't apply. "You're not just lusting after his bod, you *like* the skinny motormouth."

T.J. was tempted to get annoyed at the semislur. Since MacGowan was essentially right, he didn't bother.

Shavey grumbled under his breath. "Yeah, well. What am I supposed to do about it?"

"Be yourself?" MacGowan suggested.

Shavey's expletive was succinct and to the point. T.J. could figure where the rest of the conversation would go from there. Shavey would protest too much, MacGowan would talk him around to seeing sense, and T.J. could enjoy watching Arden take a man to his knees, although not literally, because he didn't want to go blind, and if he actually witnessed any depraved sexual acts between those two he'd have to gouge out his eyes.

T.J. padded toward the kibble bowl. MacGowan did know how to treat a cat right. He'd had some nasty meat-flavored grain-and-grass dry food in his day, and next to that this was cordon bleu. He'd just taken a big, satisfyingly crunchy yet piquant bite and started chomping when, outside, Shavey said, "How do I know he's not just screwing with me? What if I fall for him and he runs the other direction?"

"So you thought you'd come to me for advice on that?" MacGowan asked dryly, with an undercurrent of true injury. "Nice."

"That's not what I—he's T.J.'s friend, okay? Birds of a feather. I should walk away from Arden while I still can, because he's going to be a bastard, just like T.J., because that's who you fall for. The guys who are bad for you. The end."

The delicate blend of herbs, spices, and organ meats tasted suddenly like ash. T.J. swallowed and turned to the water bowl to wash his mouth out. Nothing like an abrupt jolt of reality, was there? Jeez. At least he'd managed to slip Mr. Jontan's card to

MacGowan the night before. He hadn't called it yet, true, but he'd done the right thing, and —

Oh. His water bowl appeared to be tainted. Strewn with teeny-tiny scraps of paper that probably, once upon a time, had been Mr. Jontan's card. A crudely drawn star floated points-up at him. T.J. listened hard and thought he could hear cleaning-crew brownies giggling in the shadows.

Son of a bitch! T.J. smacked his paw into the water bowl out of sheer spite. If he didn't get MacGowan the help he needed to figure out who he was and what he was capable of doing, he really would be no better than what Shavey thought of him. *Now what am I supposed to do?*

"What the fuck?" Shavey exclaimed from outside.

Thought equaled motion equaled forward propulsion. T.J.'s legs carried him outside at a dead gallop and folded beneath him like a lamed horse when he got an eyeful. No telling what'd happened or why, but the smoldering wisteria that framed Shavey in a dainty yet crispy arch that quivered over his head gave T.J. a few good ideas.

On the one hand, it was mighty nice to know he had a boyfriend who'd get pissed over insults on his behalf.

On the other hand, it was more than a tad alarming to know that MacGowan could flash-fry innocent greenery when he got mad.

On the third hand — possible since he had four in this shape — it meant he didn't have any time to lose. Sometimes a cat had to do what a cat had to do.

Time to take MacGowan to the principal's office. *Hmm. Greek or Italian?*

Chapter Fifteen

"I like this," MacGowan said simply. Hearing the words filled T.J. with a certain sense of satisfaction, the roseate glow of pride in accomplishment.

MacGowan's hand sliding into his back pocket gave him another kind of sense altogether.

Not that it was unwelcome—God, no—nor was it inappropriate. They were on a date, after all.

Sort of. T.J. was also on the hunt for Mr. Jontan. On the rare occasions when Mr. Jontan didn't answer his phone, he was usually to be found in the bohemian quarter of town, where musty bookshops, crowded curio nooks, and speakeasy eldritch supply stores made their home amid restaurants and sidewalk cafés that smelled of a hundred different savory spices.

Unfortunately, the bohemian quarter of town covered at least a square mile of real estate.

"Let me know if you get tired," T.J. said. *Please don't get tired.* Not that he had any reason to worry; MacGowan had ridiculous stamina when it came to having a good time.

He scanned a meze-style Greek café to their left. Mr. Jontan had a thing for moussaka, didn't he? "How about that one? They've got something stuffed in grape leaves that you've gotta try." He caught MacGowan by the hand and tugged him thataway. "C'mon, don't pansy out on me now. One appetizer at every place on the block. Whoever explodes first loses. That was the bet."

MacGowan laughed but didn't fight T.J.'s pull. "Just as long as we can work it off later."

"Mmm," T.J. said, noncommittal. If MacGowan was still talking to him after he'd learned the truth, that was. The closer he got to ground zero, the more nervous he

became, not a fun sensation on a stomach already stuffed with samples of spicy hot tofu wings, stuffed rice dumplings, cheese fondue, and minisized red bean toad-in-the-hole, which tasted better than it sounded.

Maybe MacGowan wouldn't forgive him for pussyfooting around with the truth. Probably wouldn't. Odds were good this was the last time he'd get to spend time with a smiling MacGowan who enjoyed his company. Which was why, even when he didn't see Mr. Jontan on a cursory scan inside the café, he sat at an empty table regardless and beckoned for a waiter. "They do terrific calamari too, or so I'm told."

"Can't wait," MacGowan said and hooked his ankle around T.J.'s under the table. "Fair warning that I already know what I want for dessert." His foot slid up T.J.'s calf.

T.J. coughed. "Yeah," he muttered. "Me too, but my eyes are bigger than my stomach."

"What?"

"Never mind. Try the ouzo."

* * * * *

T.J. left the Greek café stuffed to the top of his head. Seriously, he thought he might wobble like a Weeble when he walked. MacGowan hadn't ever had Greek food before, and once he discovered the joys of ground lamb in sauce, there'd been no moving him from his appointed spot. T.J. had watched him lick, suck, moan, and savor his way through half a dozen appetizers, all of which had to be shared so MacGowan didn't actually rupture his stomach in gustatory ecstasy, and not coincidentally so he wouldn't sweep the dishes off the table and start dry-humping him atop spilled taramosalata.

MacGowan yawned. "Remember when you said to let you know when I was getting tired?" He laced his fingers through T.J.'s. "Guess what."

T.J. bit back a groan. The thought of eating another bite made his throat close up, but they couldn't stop now. Well. He *wanted* to stop, sure. He'd love to go home with MacGowan, writhe around on the bed in agony until digestion had eased the pressure, and then fuck him through the mattress. That would be fantastic to the *n*th degree.

What he wanted and what he'd give in to were two different things now that he'd started walking down the right road at last. Had to be. He gritted his teeth and kept walking. "We'll take the long way home," he said and prayed MacGowan wouldn't yet know the difference on these streets between "the long way" and "around our asses to reach our elbows."

And on the way there was one begrimed, misbegotten alley T.J. had saved for last, hoping he wouldn't need to investigate its depths. Things lurked down there that could see a cat in a man's body and would be more than happy to dig past the crunchy outside to the chewy center.

Stood to reason that was where Mr. Jontan would be. "Check this out," T.J. said. He dropped MacGowan's hand and beckoned toward the greenery-choked entrance to the Dread Unknown. Funny. You'd think ivy couldn't look sinister. This looked like poison ivy with ambitions of becoming cyanide leaves.

"Uh," MacGowan said. He dug in his heels. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely! C'mon. There's this shop that...that—" T.J. stuttered to a stop and racked his brain for something suitably tantalizing enough to lure MacGowan down the dark path. Forbidden delights? Wicked thrills? Freak show? No, no, and no. "Just trust me, okay?" he said and immediately bit his tongue.

MacGowan peered past him. If he balked any harder he'd have donkeys complaining about his stealing their act. "Rather not." He nuzzled T.J.'s ear, and that was so not playing fair. Which T.J. would bet MacGowan knew and used shamefully to his advantage.

T.J. grumbled. "Do this for me, would you?"

"I'd rather go home," MacGowan murmured as he wrapped his arms around T.J.'s waist. "We could nap, watch the sun set, watch the moon rise, have a lot of sex—"

T.J.'s eyes crossed. He thought he sensed something tightly strung inside him go *pop* with the effort. Maybe he'd stay in man shape, if MacGowan wanted him like that so badly. Then again, MacGowan's control was slipping. He'd fried a FUCK OFF sign over Shavey's head, and poetically admirable or not, T.J. would call it a safe bet to say that hadn't been deliberate. Who knew what'd happen if MacGowan lost his grip during sex?

Egads. T.J. shuddered. "One quick trip down Alley Lane," he wheedled, pulling harder. Though he wasn't and couldn't be sure, he'd swear he'd just caught a whiff of Mr. Jontan's magical signature, a bit like expensive cologne used as ink to mark his passage. "We'll be in and out before you know it. We—" He stopped, because MacGowan had stopped; because he was a glutton for punishment, he turned to peer at MacGowan. "What?"

"All you had to do was ask," MacGowan said and pushed him tumbling headlong into the alley.

"Holy—" T.J. caught himself with a hand to the brickwork and a nice scrape to the palm. "Ow."

"Sorry." MacGowan crowded him to the wall, sounding not at all apologetic. His body weight and the smell of his skin, the aniseed of the ouzo and the warmth of his breath on T.J.'s face all combined to render T.J. momentarily speechless.

Momentarily seemed good enough for MacGowan, who dipped his head to press his lips to T.J.'s neck. He pressed his knee to T.J.'s and nudged his feet apart. "You should have just told me you were feeling too frisky to wait," he said, voice muffled on T.J.'s skin. His other hand slid down T.J.'s side and curled around his hip.

"Meow," T.J. said, head spinning. "Wait. MacGowan, I said wait. *Nnngh*." MacGowan had slid that clever, wicked hand from hip to a much nicer spot over his cock. The not-so-little traitor recognized its master and leaped to attention.

"Is that really what you want?" MacGowan playfully nibbled T.J.'s ear. "Or is this what I should listen to?" He rubbed T.J.'s cock through his jeans. "The things you do to me," he breathed over T.J.'s temple. "You get me so worked up I can't think."

"Yeah, and that's the problem. Dammit, I said *stop*." T.J. hated himself a bit more for what he was about to do but did it anyway. A good headbutt from a human got a man's attention every time.

"Jesus!" MacGowan stumbled back, that mischievous hand clapped to his nose. Above it, his eyes were wide and startled. "What did you —"

Oh, crap, nonono —

Too late. MacGowan had already paled with horror. "Oh my God, T.J., I'm—I didn't mean—I thought you were kidding, I—"

T.J. was a bastard, and he'd admit that to anyone nine times out of ten, but this was not one of those special moments. He caved. "I didn't say I didn't want it," he said and crossed his arms to draw MacGowan's eye below them, and farther still, to the redwood of a boner he sported. "Hell, I *like* the idea of semipublic fucking." Good God, did he ever. He rubbed his forehead to try to ease the building ache behind his skull. "But that's not what I brought you in here for."

MacGowan's forehead creased. "Then what's wrong? T.J...."

That wasn't a good pause. T.J. would go so far as to say it was ominous, with undertones of anger.

MacGowan's lips thinned. Yep, definitely anger, laced with frustration and a soupçon of confusion. "I swear, I can't figure you out sometimes. You almost gave me a heart attack, and now you're saying it was for no good reason?"

T.J. wished he had a nice handy desk to bang his head on. "*No*. There's something down here you need to see."

He might as well have saved his breath; MacGowan wasn't listening. For the first time, MacGowan was past California-cool seduction and into the realms of *pissed*. "Shut up, T.J."

That gave T.J. pause. As well as lockjaw. No, literally. His mouth shut with a *snap*, and it didn't take a guy familiar with the ways of wizards to know he wasn't going to get a word in edgewise before MacGowan had said his piece.

Not good, oh, no, so not good. T.J. cast about for the faint hint of Mr. Jontan's presence and found nothing. He swore profoundly and thoroughly inside his head, then resigned himself to his punishment. Wasn't anything he didn't deserve for dicking MacGowan around.

He still wanted to be with him. That was what MacGowan did to *T.J.*; he turned his head around, spun him on his axis, made him willing to do anything to be near the

guy, almost as if they were linked somehow beyond the ordinary sex-and-love schtick. Not that sex-and-love with MacGowan were ordinary. T.J. slumped back, looked at MacGowan in unwilling silence, and waited for it.

"It" was worse than wrath and rampaging shouts. It was disappointment. MacGowan drooped against the facing wall, hands in his pockets, and looked T.J. in the eye. "Are you just playing with me? I've got to know, T.J. I want you to be the one I've been hoping for, and I swear I don't want to think Shavey's right about you being a jerk."

Golly, but it would have been nice to be able to talk right about then to defend himself. All T.J. could do was look away in self-condemning silence.

"You leave me in the middle of the night. You show up whenever you want to have fun, and you disappear without warning. And the way Arden acts around you, it's like there's some big secret you're keeping."

Did Shavey say that? Is that why you flash-fried the flora over his head? T.J. tried to talk and managed no more than a buzzing drone.

MacGowan hugged his chest and tucked his chin down. "I just want to know. Is this a game, or do you give a damn about me at all?" He smiled, crooked and one-sided, nothing funny about it at all. "Would you say something already?"

T.J.'s jaw unlocked. "I'm not messing with you," he said, steady as a rock and about as unyielding as loose gravel. "I'm trying to help."

"Help me with what?"

T.J.'s mouth closed again. He was the one responsible this time. Explaining had seemed simple in theory. In practice, not so much. "MacGowan, it's complicated. Let me take it from the top, okay? I can't stop thinking about you. I can't stop wishing we were in dark places doing things exactly like what you thought I wanted to come down this alley for. But when I'm with you, I..." *I turn into a cat. Yeah, that'll go over well. But isn't that what he has to know? Fuck.* "I can't control myself," he settled for saying instead. "But I can't stay away, either. Where you go, I have to follow. It's like we're fucking joined at the hip as well as the head or something and I—"

A switch flipped in T.J.'s head. Neurons jumped up and down screaming *wheweee!* "Fuck me sideways on a flaming cracker," he said, lips going numb. It all made sense now. Unaware or not, a wizard always had one thing going for him.

His familiar. Sometimes a raven, sometimes a frog, and sometimes a *cat*. T.J. slapped his forehead and groaned. "Something familiar, all right," he mumbled. "Hilarious."

"What?" MacGowan stared at him. He ran his hand through his hair. "That's another thing. You say these things I don't get. Are you laughing at me because I'm too stupid to understand the joke?"

"Say huh now? No!" T.J. protested. His brain tried to catch up with and intercept his mouth, more than inclined to ramble on and tell MacGowan anything that'd make

him happy again. He bristled. "You're not stupid. If you ever say that again in front of me, I'll kick your ass. Got it?"

MacGowan mumbled something unintelligible and looked away.

No way was T.J. letting that stand. "You're not dumb," T.J. said. He mirrored MacGowan's frontal assault and crowded him in turn. MacGowan let him, pressed flat to the bricks, but wouldn't look at T.J. until T.J. caught him by the chin and lifted his face. "If anything, I'm the idiot around here. I've been the one screwing up everything I touch, not you, and I'll do whatever it takes to prove that."

"Like what?" MacGowan asked, dubious.

Dubious, that was, right up to the point where T.J. fitted their bodies together, as perfect as if they'd been made to go together—coincidentally enough, he now knew they had—and kissed MacGowan quiet.

As distractions and-slash-or apologies went, T.J. would challenge anybody to find one better.

MacGowan fought, at first. Not T.J., but himself. One hand on T.J.'s shoulder, pressure deep in muscle and ragged-edged nails scraping, one hovering at T.J.'s hip as if torn between pushing him away and pulling him closer. He wasn't kissing T.J. back.

T.J. stopped, though he hated to. He tried to wait for MacGowan to gather himself.

Trouble was, he never had been any good at patience. "MacGowan, let me do this," he said before MacGowan had found his words. "Please."

When he risked peeking through his eyelashes, he saw that MacGowan's eyes were open, locked on him, confused and horny and frustrated with his own indecision. "You don't have to," MacGowan said at last. "If this is about me not stopping earlier—"

T.J. groaned. He wasn't about to headbutt MacGowan again, but it would have been tremendously satisfying. "It has nothing to do with that clusterfuck."

MacGowan laughed, short and brittle. "No? Sure feels like it to me."

"Then let me show you different." T.J. cut off MacGowan's questioning with another kiss. MacGowan had softened and hardened by the time he parted his lips to let T.J. in. Relaxed to give T.J. room to play, and hard where it counted, hips rolling to meet T.J.'s questing grasp. He didn't look down. Didn't need to. MacGowan's cock was as stiff as it'd been before. Maybe he'd never gone soft. Who knew?

"Then what is it about?" MacGowan still had the brainpower left to say when T.J. broke the kiss to draw a clear breath. He was one up on T.J., who had to order his scrambled brain cells into line and threaten to whip them before he could put words in order and remember what the hell MacGowan was talking about.

"Being human," T.J. said. "That's all that matters. Everything else is—should be—just details. In a perfect world, anyway." He rubbed MacGowan's hip, close enough to tease, near enough to promise, far enough away to drive MacGowan crazy. "Look, I...I want you to know, okay?"

MacGowan licked his kiss-swollen lips and tried to focus on T.J. "Know *what*? You're not making any sense."

"If I had a nickel for every time I've heard that one before," T.J. muttered. "Listen to me and don't interrupt. Promise?"

MacGowan nodded. Silently.

T.J. spread his fingers over MacGowan's chest. He could feel the thumping of MacGowan's heart beneath them. Strong. Quick. Human. He couldn't stop listening, nor could he make himself look up at MacGowan's face. "I want you to know, no matter what, that this is real. This is me, and this is what I feel for you. Nothing made me feel this way. Before you I was the last person in the world who'd have believed this could be real, but it is. It's all me, who cares about you. *I*."

"You're freaking me out, T.J. What's going on?" MacGowan tried to catch his wrist and push him away.

T.J. wouldn't let him. "Tell you later. I swear. Let me do this." He fondled MacGowan, light strokes to tease. MacGowan's head hit the wall, lips parted a half inch, eyelids heavy. T.J. followed, mouth to his cheek, his jaw, beneath his ear, at his throat. He'd never get enough of MacGowan. He wanted as much as he could to remember him by when MacGowan learned to hate him.

"I don't need —" MacGowan rallied for one last objection. Transparent, bent sense of honor. T.J. loved it and he hated it.

"No. But I want to give. Okay?" He unfastened MacGowan's pants, quick and efficient, and drew his engorged cock out to grasp it, to memorize the weight and the feel of him. How he hardened further still in T.J.'s hand and moaned, low and quiet. He drew his thumbnail backward down the shaft and ignored the pounding in his own groin. Wasn't important, not now. "Okay?"

"I don't get it," MacGowan said, dazed, "But I—*oh God*."

Enough was enough. T.J. kept MacGowan quiet. Anything more out of him and he'd have lost his nerve, his heart, his head. Three out of three was bad odds. MacGowan shuddered, head turning to and fro, but wherever he went, T.J. followed to catch him and hold him. He might still push T.J. away, and T.J. wasn't going to let that happen. He needed this. Wanted MacGowan to know it was real.

He thought, for a second, that MacGowan would push him away, but then, hands were at the back of T.J.'s head to keep *him* still, and MacGowan thrust into his hand. T.J. swallowed his small, lusty moan of surrender and let MacGowan turn the kiss back on him. He relished the prickles of pain as MacGowan pulled his hair with the too-tight knots of his fingers and worked MacGowan's cock with all his might.

And then the dim lights sporadically dotted down the alley began to flicker. Not much, at first. One on, one off, off-on-off-on-off. The syncopation of light and darkness was an irritation, then an alarm. T.J. forced himself away from MacGowan, though MacGowan jerked his hair hard enough to make his eyes sting with sudden salt, to

look. Wasn't just the lights he saw, but the bricks, a faint powder of dust sifting away from them. One or two, not many, but enough, shuddered in their places along the wall.

Good God. The earth might actually move for him.

T.J. might have stopped then, but MacGowan wouldn't let him. Ever stronger than he looked—unless he was borrowing that too, all-unknowing, from the powers he didn't want to tap—he pinned T.J. to him and wouldn't let him move. Chips of pebbles, fallen leaves, cigarette butts and empty, dented beer cans, all began to rattle and dance around their feet.

He could hope nothing worse would happen. He could also hope the sun would rise in the west tomorrow, *and he was so not thinking about that with MacGowan in this state.* Yet MacGowan wouldn't let him stop. T.J. didn't think anything could make MacGowan stop, not now, not here.

Knowledge blurred in the back of T.J.'s head. He didn't understand it, didn't try to, just went with it. He melted against MacGowan's chest and licked his way through MacGowan's parted lips. Turned it back again. Poured himself into MacGowan. Fumbled for MacGowan's hand and pressed it to his cock, molded MacGowan's grasp around it, and thrust up. That, though, that was only his body, and the body was only a bridge.

Between them, over that pathway, T.J. pushed the calm he hadn't known he possessed from within himself, to MacGowan. He could see the transfer inside his head, though no one could with the naked eye. In return, he drew inside his body the frustration, the need to burn, the destroying surge of chaos. Swallowed it and let it churn within him. Urged MacGowan's hand down his pants and thrust in a nonrhythm that kept MacGowan distracted even as MacGowan churned toward the finish line.

T.J. swallowed the last drop of what MacGowan couldn't control, let the fire burn him alive inside, and brought MacGowan off with a vicious flick of the wrist. MacGowan hiccuped out his crescendo while T.J. held him tight. Spilled down T.J.'s wrist, streams trickled down T.J.'s arm to land creamy-thick on their shoes and the alley floor. T.J. took it all and poured the last of what he had to give into MacGowan. The orgasm took T.J. by surprise when it jolted out of him.

The alley stilled. Nothing damaged. No walls came a-tumbling down. If it weren't for the steam heat of their breathing, ragged and asynchronous, and the cooling cum spilled between them over the shifted debris of this small corner of the world, no one would know anything had ever happened here.

"Holy..." MacGowan gave up the curse halfway through and struggled to catch his breath. "T.J. What was...?"

T.J. wasn't quite back there with the speech part of the program yet. He pressed his face to MacGowan's shoulder, shuddered, and was still.

A discreet clearing of a throat caught his attention. Whoever it was managed to convey slight embarrassment and impatience in the same scrap of sound. Not one of the alley's usuals; they'd have applauded or catcalled or thrown rotten tomatoes. Not

Shavey. He'd have already had his hand down T.J.'s throat to rip his liver out. Not Arden; see above re: catcalling, and in his case probably offering advice.

Which left...

"I thought I might find you here," Mr. Jontan said. T.J. looked up and saw the lean, lanky body of the meanest wizard in these parts blocking the mouth of the alley, his back turned in deference but his stance firm. "If you two are quite finished, I'll need to borrow T.J. for a moment, thank you."

Peachy.

Chapter Sixteen

Being summoned for walkies by a wizard wasn't like being called to the principal's office. It was more like being shown a green mile and told to march.

"Where were you five minutes ago?" T.J. hissed. He had to hurry to keep up with the pace Mr. Jontan set with his longer legs and easy stride, more accustomed than T.J. was in human shape to rambling walks. "Could have used your help. Jericho reenactment time, you know what I mean?"

"I was fully aware," Mr. Jontan said. "This way, please."

He vanished around a corner. Possibly literally; it was too quick for T.J. to be sure. Still loose and woozy from coming and high on magic, his reflexes weren't at their addled best.

T.J. pushed his way through a trio of late-night clubbers—hopefully they were too drunk to throw punches at him for mussing their hair—and caught up with Mr. Jontan in front of a dimly lit bookstore. Mr. Jontan studied the volumes through the dirty window glass. His reflection was unmussed and calm as a cloudless summer day. "You do move slowly," Mr. Jontan remarked. "Try to keep up, thank you. This way."

Swearing under his breath, T.J. half jogged to keep pace. *I look like a spastic chicken, and he looks like he's moving in slow motion. I hate wizards. Except for MacGowan.*

"Yes, MacGowan," Mr. Jontan remarked in the calm tone he'd use to discuss the nuances of a cup of tea. "I'll make this brief, shall I? I'm separating the two of you."

T.J. stumbled to a halt, stared after Mr. Jontan's rapidly disappearing back, and forced his rubbery legs to carry him forward. "Want to say that again?"

"Why? I'm sure you heard me." Mr. Jontan walked as if there were no one on the path in front of him, and for him, there might as well not have been. People tended to get out of his way without knowing they were being accommodating. They changed

their minds and surged back just in time for T.J. to trip, curse, stumble, and fight his way through them.

When he caught up with Mr. Jontan for what he swore to Bast and all her kittens was going to be the last time before he doubled back and headed in MacGowan's direction, T.J. tried to dodge in front of Mr. Jontan to stop him. "I'm his familiar. You can't put us in separate corners. That's not how it works."

Mr. Jontan regarded him with the patient curiosity of a child with a magnifying glass and a bug on the sidewalk. "I did wonder when you'd figure that out."

"You knew all along? Stupid me. Of course you did."

"I told you I wouldn't do your homework for you," Mr. Jontan said. He stood still, though, and that was something. "The magical flare you two just created was extraordinary, you know. A textbook example of the natural connection between wizard and familiar. It might have brought a tear to my eye. Remarkable."

Huh. No kidding? "Which brings me back to separating us. We've got the hang of it now."

"You do." Mr. Jontan wasn't wearing glasses, but he gave the distinct impression of peering over them at T.J. "He does not. If you were capable of telling MacGowan the truth about himself, you would have done it before now. While you were able to control him, you were with him at the time. Very with him." Mr. Jontan didn't blush, but there were certain vibes about him just then that suggested he wished he could. "If you are not with him when something like this should happen again, there's too much at risk."

It was the right thing. T.J. knew that. Didn't mean he had to like it. He shut his mouth, knowing nothing he could say would change Mr. Jontan's mind.

"You think I don't, I'm sure, but I do understand, you know," Mr. Jontan said, almost kindly. "You've feared driving him away since this began, and therefore you've played all your cards close to your chest to minimize the risk of loss. It's human nature. Bifurcated nature in your case, but the metaphor stands."

Now, T.J. thought, would have been a great time to keep his mouth shut. Like that'd happen. "What else did I do wrong?"

"Shall I make a list, or do you have a few hours for me to enumerate aloud?" Mr. Jontan regarded him frankly, no heat in the words, but still they burned. "Making mistakes is part of the process, but there comes a point, and we have reached it. What you must understand is that in wishing to make no bad choices, you have allowed yourself to be carried along. Moreover, and do listen carefully to this: you have denied MacGowan any and all choices he *should* have been aware of, and deprived him of the ability to make those decisions."

Hearing that was not unlike swallowing a block of ice too big for his throat. T.J. tried to look away but found he couldn't. Freakin' wizards. "Then this is all my fault. Everything. More than I knew."

Mr. Jontan inclined his head in silence.

There was nothing to do but accept it, was there? "What are you going to do with him?"

"For starters – we are blocking traffic, T.J.; if you would walk with me a bit farther? Thank you – he'll have to be told, and I think it best if he hears certain things from me."

Panic tasted sour on the sides of T.J.'s tongue. "You're going to tell him about me too, aren't you? What I am."

"Don't be daft. Of course not." Mr. Jontan slowed his pace. "For one, I am not cruel. For two, that's between the pair of you. I'd be as likely to tell him the moon is made of green cheese. He wouldn't believe it coming from me. Those words must come from you, and the sooner the better. I'll do what I can, because I must. The rest is up to you." He paused. "You could, of course, forbid me to meddle. It'd be very rude to meddle in the affairs of a familiar and a wizard."

Yeah. Sure. T.J. believed him about as much as he believed monkeys would fly out of Shavey's ass. "But...?" he prompted.

"Would you be fool enough to stop me? If so, now's your chance." Mr. Jontan nodded to direct T.J.'s gaze up and across. The mouth of the alley. Mr. Jontan had led him around in circles, right back to where MacGowan would be waiting just inside if he hadn't run away, still dazed and confused...but no. He'd still be there. Trusting T.J. would return.

Damn it.

T.J. hung back, though it hurt with a physical wrench, and didn't go to MacGowan. Mr. Jontan was right. "I'll be home," he said, his lips numb. "Do me one favor, okay?"

Mr. Jontan nodded. Was that a tiny shine of curiosity he detected? T.J. hoped so and went for it. "Tell him I meant what I said just before you got there. Promise me."

"My word is my bond," Mr. Jontan said. He offered T.J. his hand. Handshakes served as contracts, once upon a time. Mr. Jontan played by old-school rules. "It's a rare man who'd do the right thing in the end, no matter how much it hurts," he said. "Perhaps MacGowan will appreciate that."

"Perhaps," T.J. mocked as he turned to go and walk away, home, alone. "In the real world? Probably not."

* * * * *

Whoever came up with the phrase "may you live in interesting times" must have had T.J.'s picture taped to a dartboard and aimed with their eyes closed as they spoke the magic words. Or so T.J. decided when he finished his long trudge home on his lonesome to find Arden planted like a tree on the stairs, almost jiggling up and down with impatience.

"Fucking finally!" Arden bounded up, hurtled down, and grabbed T.J. by the lapels. "I am in crisis. It is your official duty to pour drinks down me until the world

makes sense again." He stopped, wrinkled his nose, and studied T.J. more closely. "I'm guessing you're going to ask me to do the same thing. Hope you've stocked the liquor cabinet since the last time I raided it. This is going to take the best part of a bottle."

"Make that two," T.J. said. "Why didn't you go in and help yourself, idiot? You have a key."

Arden muttered and wouldn't meet T.J.'s questioning gaze.

"What was that?"

"I said," Arden enunciated clearly, "Sur Lune wouldn't let me in."

T.J. tried not to smile. Nay, to grin. Really tried not to laugh. It wasn't even that funny, but God help him if he wasn't ready to bust a rib.

Arden wrinkled his nose. "I'll punt the bastard out of the way this time if need be," he pronounced. "You need that drink *more* than I do. But for the sake of my dignity, can the record be edited to show that I chose to wait on the steps for you out of respect for your privacy and because I'm that good a friend? Which reminds me, you owe me a tank of gas for the bike and your firstborn in exchange for riding her ragged, assface."

T.J. thought that one over between attempts to stifle the fuck-I'm-tired giggles. "This is still you we're talking about, isn't it? How does *that* spare your pride?"

Arden grumped. "Just get a move on before we die of lack of alcohol poisoning, would you? There's too much blood in my bourbon stream."

"You hate bourbon."

"Semantics, semantics. No need to fuck with a great exit line just because it doesn't make sense. Hup, two, three, four."

* * * * *

T.J. sat with one leg over the arm of the chair he always took for himself. It'd conformed to the shape of his body at all angles, squishy and accommodating. At the moment, it cradled him like a thorny bough. He fidgeted, decided it wasn't worth the effort it'd take to dig out the spring poking him in the ass, and took the highball glass of something potently toxic Arden offered.

Arden sat across from him. His knuckles were white around his glass, his lip raw from where he'd gnawed at it, and he couldn't seem to stop tapping his foot. "Wait, you honestly are upset," T.J. said, struggling to sit upright. "You—" He broke off. "You have hickies. And"—he squinted—"is that *beard burn* on your cheeks?"

"And on my chest, and on my ass, and on places I'd never thought a beard would go unless I was with a woman in a truly convincing Halloween costume." Arden aimed his death glare at his glass.

"You were with Shavey."

"No, I was with a gorilla who needed a trim."

"You were with Shavey," T.J. said. "There's not that much of a difference if you ask me." He noted the interesting way in which Arden fidgeted on his seat. Shiftily, sure, but also gingerly. His jaw dropped. "No way."

Apparently *schadenfreude* was the one thing that could distract a man from his own hate-on for the world at large. Good to know. "You bottomed?" T.J. asked, incredulous and not at all ashamed of being delighted. He sobered a second later. "Wait. This is where we come to the 'crisis' part, right?" He drew up with a sudden, welcome flare of anger. "If that jackass hurt you, I'm going to shoot first and ask questions later."

Arden went an interesting shade of plum beneath the pinkness of his remarkable case of whisker burn. "He didn't hurt me. Well, not in any way I didn't ask for. Loudly. Repeatedly. Are you getting the picture here? I can't spill too much more without sounding like a Victorian maiden."

"Arden," T.J. said in all sincerity, "trust me when I tell you that's the last thing you ever have to worry about. *Ever*. Screw the guy code. What happened?"

Arden blew out a long breath. "So I'm coming over here to raid your liquor cabinet. Some things never change, do they? Anyway, he's waiting downstairs, pissed off because MacGowan's not answering his phone. He insults me, I insult him, one thing leads to another." Arden waved his hand vaguely yet effectively obscenely. "Next thing I know I've got my ankles around my ears."

"Willingly?" T.J. asked, cautious.

"And then some. Do I need to repeat the 'harder, big boy' parts of the conversation or do you finally have the general idea?"

"Huh." T.J. sipped his drink to give himself time to process this. And not to crack up. "You were willing. You enjoyed it. You're not a homophobe. You didn't seem too freaked about the concept of fucking Shavey. What changed?"

"I liked it," Arden said. "And I want to do it again."

"Ah." T.J. put his glass aside. "Mazel tov."

Arden picked an ice cube out of his drink and flicked it at T.J. "That's all you've got to say for yourself?"

T.J. dodged the frozen bullet. Good thing too. It probably would have melted on his rapidly rising temper. "Yeah, it is. Fuck, Arden. How many times have you listened to me talking about the improbability of connecting with someone? You got luckier than most people ever dream of and you weren't even trying. Are you listening to me?"

For once, T.J. thought Arden actually was. *Wonders never cease*.

"I'm not talking about a plus-one dick. Understand that. I'm saying I was wrong. Have been wrong all along. Now I know that it happens sometimes, once in a blue moon, that people who shouldn't or by all laws of sanity couldn't hook up, do, and in that magic moment they fall for each other. Fall in love." T.J. made quote fingers. "It's

like you said at the store. Love makes people crazy. It makes them stupid. And honest enough to know when they're not good enough."

T.J. flashed back, inside his head, to MacGowan's hands on his face, to the touch of his lips, to the way he touched T.J., and to the words guys usually didn't say, ones MacGowan hadn't hesitated over because he meant them. *He loves me.*

I should wish he didn't...but I can't.

Back in Crazyland, the churning of Arden's thoughts was almost as audible as oars beating against the current. "Throwing my own words back at me," he said at last. "Well done."

T.J. shrugged. "I thought so. But just so you don't think I've changed my mind about everything, I still think Shavey's a total dick."

"It hadn't escaped my notice, no." Arden sucked the finger he'd had in his liquor glass. "By happy coincidence, I'm starting to appreciate the finer qualities of dick. It all works out. Also interesting: Shavey's got a cock the size of an elephant's leg. Does that make me a size queen?"

"Yes. You can pick your tiara up at the next white sale."

Arden gave him the finger. "He said I could top next time. It'll be like riding a humpback whale." He tilted his head thoughtfully to the side. "Wonder if I need a saddle."

"Scarred for life now, thank you. Can we not talk about Shavey now?"

T.J. realized his mistake point-one seconds before Arden pounced. "Fine by me. You came home with a face like a thundercloud, far worse off than I was. Since I've spilled my guts, how about you slice yours open and let your kindly old Uncle Arden in on the gossip? I mean, so I can help you. No prurient interest here at all, nope."

He could. Arden would make fun of him for days, but it was possible.

Mr. Jontan had said it was between the two of them. *Peachy.*

Arden wouldn't understand this, and T.J. didn't expect him to, so he might as well be as much of a dick about it as he could. Give him a reason to be pissed off. "No." T.J. pushed to his feet and stalked out of his apartment before Arden could stop him.

The wind must have been from the north. For once, T.J. didn't smell Sur Lune before he saw him, or more accurately, before Sur Lune slithered over his foot and between his ankles. It was like being snuggled by a furry snake.

Sur Lune bared his teeth at T.J. in a nasty feline smirk. He couldn't hear Sur Lune in human shape, but he understood the gist. *Gotcha.*

Chapter Seventeen

T.J. tried to stuff his heart back down his throat. The alcohol burn from whatever Arden had given him to drink made it a raw and rough trip. “Do that again and I’ll swing you around by your tail until unstoppable force meets immovable object.”

Sur Lune sneered at him. *As if* came through loud and clear. Also, *you don’t have the balls.*

Fuck it. Fine. T.J. threw his hands in the air. One of them, anyway. He protected his crotch with the other. Sur Lune was in a *mood*. He could taste it like lightning before a storm, sickly sweet like ozone and roughly as dangerous as a toppled-over power grid. “What do you want?”

Sur Lune licked his paw. At first, T.J. didn’t believe what he saw. Either he’d started hallucinating, or Sur Lune was...clean. A sniff test proved it. “The world’s coming to an end,” he said. “Someone bathed you?”

The claws came out to be cleaned one at a time. Pointedly. So to speak. *Mock me and die.*

T.J. put that aside to baffle at later. “Arden says you wouldn’t let him in until I got here. Was that just you being an ass, or did you have a reason?”

Sur Lune turned to flip his tail up at T.J., then turned back about to face him. No—to look at him, eye to eye. The sickly yellow-green of Sur Lune’s irises was almost hypnotic. Almost...screw that, it *was* mesmerizing, and by the time T.J. understood that it was too late. He’d fallen into the green.

Within that dark and virulent place, Sur Lune spoke to T.J. in the voice he hadn’t heard since the last time he’d seen Sur Lune in human shape. Years had passed, but he’d know that sin-dark rumble anywhere.

"*You should know better than this,*" Sur Lune said, and that was all he said. There was a sensation as of someone pushing T.J. with a battering ram to the gut, and he found himself back in his body, gasping for air from winded lungs.

Sur Lune sneered at him once more and slithered away into the darkness.

"What the hell?" T.J. called after him. "What was that about? Got any more gems of wisdom for me? Anything I don't already know I don't know? Don't turn your back on me when I'm talking to you, Sur Lune!"

"Who's Sur Lune?"

Ah. Another voice he'd know anywhere. Looked like breaking in a virgin and making him love it didn't do a thing to smooth off Shavey's rough edges. "How about we not do this and say we did?" T.J. asked.

"Not a chance." Shavey started up the steps. "Who's Sur Lune?"

"No one you need to worry about." T.J. faced Shavey. If he was going to get pounded, he'd take his licks like a man. "You should probably worry more about MacGowan."

That was the wrongest thing I could have thought of to say, wasn't it? Too bad you didn't get take-backs in pissing contests. Mount St. Shavey surged as smoothly as Sur Lune when it came to locking onto a target and loomed high above T.J. "Want to tell me why I should worry about MacGowan right now?"

T.J. guessed that "no, I really don't" wouldn't go over too well as an answer. "Because he's your friend, and I—" *Crap, strike two.* "Believe it or not, I care about him. More than you want to think I do." Righteous wrath plus honesty felt good, as reviving as a dash of cold water to a feverish forehead. Relative temperatures reversed, of course. "I would cut off my own tail before I let him get hurt again."

Truth, all truth, and nothing but the truth. Maybe too *much* truth. "My leg," T.J. amended. "Or my arm, or even my dick. Does that convince you I'm serious about not hurting him now if I can help it?" He didn't know if Shavey would let himself believe anything.

From the tightening of Shavey's jaw and the clenching of his fists, he kinda doubted it. "Hurting him 'now'?" Shavey asked, far too politely. "As in, you would have before?"

"Back for more already?" Arden shut the door behind him and popped his collar. He hung on Shavey's shoulder, and in a way that T.J. would never be able to forget—no matter how hard he tried—looked good there. They fit together somehow.

That, at least, got through Shavey's bullet head. "I, uh—" He stalled out. "I didn't know you were still here."

"I didn't have anywhere else to go, but if you're *up* for it you could *come with me,*" Arden said, waggling his eyebrows and then his tongue, curling it over his teeth.

Shavey stuttered, rendered speechless.

You had to hand it to Arden. Forget double entendre; he could manage a triple threat in his sleep and bridge sexual divides in a single bound.

Arden mouthed, *I've got this one*, at T.J. and reached behind Shavey. Shavey flinched and squeaked. Ah. He'd just discovered the amazing supergrip powers of Arden's pinches, hadn't he? *They grow up so fast.*

"Now, gentlemen," Arden said, staying put, "either you play nice, or no one plays at all. You" — he nodded to T.J. — "mind yourself. I've had a call from Mr. Jontan, who is a *work associate*, Mr. Jealous Dick, and he said you should stay put for a while. You—" Shavey swallowed a higher-pitched squeak. "You follow me. Too late to go check out feed and tack stores, but I'm good at improvising. A saddle can't be too *hard*."

Shavey gaped at Arden. T.J. marveled. Arden might as well have tied a leash to the guy's dick and told him to heel. It was a remarkable power that he'd have to be cautioned to use only for good.

Later. After Shavey had been reduced to a puddle of worn-out testosterone cells.

"We're out of here. Heel, Shavey." Arden waved at T.J. over his shoulder. "Don't wait up for me." *Translation: I'll keep him out of your hair. And enjoy it. Lucky us, huh?*

Lucky us, T.J. thought, returning the wave. *Lucky fucking us.*

* * * * *

Since he and Sur Lune had met, T.J. had thought many things of him, mostly warily. He'd never counted on wondering if maybe Sur Lune had the right idea.

During the few blissful hours T.J. had spent thinking of himself as nothing more than a cat, than MacGowan's favorite "Buddy," purring in the sun and mellow with love that didn't need to be defined, he'd been happy. He couldn't remember a time when he'd been that contented, felt such adoration...been so free.

Granted, Sur Lune's going feline on a permanent basis had driven him over the edge and into the creative side of mental health, but you won some, you lost some. Sur Lune hadn't had someone to keep him steady and to rub his ears. T.J. would.

If he couldn't be MacGowan's man, maybe he could still be Buddy for MacGowan. His feline nature wanted that. He could be all MacGowan wanted and needed as a familiar and a friend, no complications, and everyone would get what they wanted. Mr. Jontan would come up with a reason for why T.J. had disappeared, hopefully one that made him look like even more of an ass so that MacGowan would be glad to have seen the last of him. Arden would go batshit crazy, but he had a Shavey now and love changed everything. Love or lust plus a Donkey Kong-sized dick. They both worked. T.J. shrugged. *C'est le chat?*

It could work.

Until the first time MacGowan brought home another man, came the unwelcome thought. Until he shut T.J. out of his bedroom, and T.J. had to listen to that bastard moaning MacGowan's name. *How'd you like them kibbles, sucker?*

T.J. hated it when *he* was right.

He rested his chin on his hand and stared at nothing. The rough wood of the stairs chafed his ass, the chill of the night air made his skin pop up in goose bumps, and he'd have been a hell of a lot more comfortable elsewhere, but whenever he thought about moving, he shunted the desire aside. It'd count high on the list of dumb moves he'd made in his life, but he had to see MacGowan coming home. Just to know he was okay. Then he'd retreat.

What came next would be anyone's guess.

He heard them from a distance, a soft murmur of voices before the crunch of footsteps over worn-down gravel, emerging from the shrubbery at the far edge of the parking lot. MacGowan looked smaller and younger next to Mr. Jontan, who looked older than usual, who looked his age tonight, haggard and almost gray. They spoke to each other in cautious code, one T.J. had heard enough of to understand. One MacGowan could only have started learning tonight. Despite everything else, T.J. swelled with pride over his wizard's smarts.

Reacting to the nearness of MacGowan, T.J.'s body demanded that he change forms. *Now*. Somehow, he didn't. He held on by the thinnest of threads. Maybe he'd see MacGowan plenty with feline eyes after tonight, maybe not, but T.J. wanted to look at him as a man one more time.

As MacGowan drew closer, T.J. could see that his skin was pale, dark shadows had appeared under his eyes, and that he held his arms crossed protectively over his chest. Unhappy. Three guesses as to why, and the first two didn't count, but if there was a truth you didn't want to face, you didn't have a choice if Mr. Jontan got involved.

"...can't make it go away?" MacGowan said. "You're sure?"

"There is no changing what is," Mr. Jontan said.

T.J. glowered. *That's what you've got to say to him? Perfect. Peachy. Riddles are exactly what we need right now, thanks. Or, you know, not.*

"There's only shaping what can be," Mr. Jontan went on. "You are who you are, and that is a wizard. Or you will be."

"You said I was too old."

"Stranger things have happened. Don't fight fate, MacGowan. Your time has come."

MacGowan shivered and was, for a moment, quiet. "What about T.J.?"

T.J. sat up straighter. Mr. Jontan had sworn he wouldn't tell. If he'd broken his promise—

"What about him?" Mr. Jontan asked, calm as a blank book of Zen secrets.

"He's just... He's strange sometimes, but..." MacGowan gave up. "He'll freak out. He'll hate me."

The splintering in his voice, his posture, the downturn of his lips, all pierced T.J.'s heart. *Oh, no. No no no, you've got it all wrong.*

"I sincerely doubt it," Mr. Jontan said.

MacGowan rubbed his elbows. "You know him better than I do."

"Yes, but thankfully I am not the one in love with him."

The words hit harder coming from another's lips.

"Should I tell him?" MacGowan asked, woebegone and lost.

"I don't know." Mr. Jontan stopped and tucked his hands in his pockets and studied MacGowan. "You tell me. Should you?"

"I..." MacGowan looked away. Looked toward the stairs and saw T.J., who wouldn't have been able to move if a comet had been streaking toward his head rather than the guy who'd stolen his heart approaching on two feet. He fell quiet, words evaporating in the cool air.

T.J. swallowed hard. He inclined his head, once, and tried to look away but couldn't make himself. *MacGowan*.

"God help children, fools, and cats," Mr. Jontan muttered. As best as T.J. could tell, not that he was paying too much attention, MacGowan didn't hear that. "I'll be off then. Do try not to blow the place up, would you? I've left some books inside that would be an annoying lot of bother to replace. Good night."

Mr. Jontan disappeared. *Poof*, gone. He didn't usually go in for the showy stuff. Maybe he was making a point, maybe he just didn't want to be there for any more awkwardness, and more than maybe T.J. didn't care, because MacGowan was approaching him.

MacGowan stopped at the foot of the stairs, close enough to touch, but not quite.

"Six degrees of separation," T.J. said. He dropped his hand, palm up, to his knee. "Hi."

"Hi." MacGowan had bitten his lips red and raw. He'd hunched in on himself, smaller than his size.

T.J. wanted to give in and comfort MacGowan. To make the worries he could dissipate go away. But he didn't. "I guess we need to talk."

MacGowan looked at his shoes, then his hands, and with his face turned away, T.J. couldn't tell what he was thinking.

"MacGowan?" T.J. didn't stop to consider what might happen; it was instinct to reach out and take MacGowan's hand. He saw what he'd done when he felt it, a shudder and jolt of something almost electrical when their fingers touched. The low, demanding urge to shift shape melted away like the touchdown of a snowflake on a smoking griddle.

Right now, MacGowan didn't want a cat. He wanted a man.

One more time, T.J. told himself. Doesn't matter what we both know. Just one more time.

“Come inside with me?” MacGowan asked, intertwining his fingers with T.J.’s and holding on tight. “Stay tonight?”

T.J. had never been able to tell MacGowan no. That held true now. He’d never wanted to say no. That hadn’t changed either. “Yes.”

Chapter Eighteen

MacGowan didn't turn the lights on, and T.J. was glad. Easier if they didn't have to look each other in the eye; easier if they could just give their bodies and themselves what they wanted. Needed. No smart remarks and no blushes. Just them. Just this.

Warm breath ghosted over T.J.'s temple, and firm, rough-skinned palms skimmed where the breath had touched. Soft lips brushed his, searching, and lingered, asking permission. T.J. set his hand at the small of MacGowan's back and let MacGowan in. MacGowan moaned, a small sound lost somewhere inside him, and rested his weight on T.J. to better give his all to the kiss. His weight was at once heavy and negligible. Both made T.J. shiver, but not more so than MacGowan stroking his stomach, finding his way under T.J.'s too-light shirt and up over his heart, and then down to his navel.

Petting him. Searching. T.J. didn't know if he knew. Maybe deep down, he guessed.

And that wasn't what this was about. He countered instinctively as a man would and drew his thumbnail in a long run down MacGowan's spine. MacGowan shuddered, his lips lifting away for a moment. One moment in which T.J. knew what MacGowan wanted and gave it to him. Took it from him. Guided MacGowan with a push here and a pull there and turned them roundabout with MacGowan's back to the wall and T.J.'s body between him and the rest of the world.

T.J. kissed MacGowan everywhere he could reach and didn't stop there. He tapped MacGowan's arms and pulled at his shirt in silent direction. *This comes off.* He only let their lips part for the seconds needed to strip away the clothes that got between them, and when it was bare chest to bare chest, the first touch of naked skin made both hiss. He skimmed his hands down the back of MacGowan's jeans to cup and knead his ass, his rhythm asynchronous. At least he didn't purr.

"T.J...."

"Shhh." T.J. kissed the breath out of MacGowan and withdrew only to open MacGowan's jeans and draw out his cock. "Just don't."

MacGowan's grip tightened, painful, good. He nodded, strung too tight to say anything.

T.J. had enough left in him to say, "You need this," before he went to his knees. He took one, two, three seconds to bury his nose in MacGowan's groin and inhale the rich, musky scent of him before he licked and coaxed MacGowan's cock into his mouth.

MacGowan groaned, once, and found his way to T.J.'s head without needing to see. His thumbs bracketed T.J.'s jaw and angled him, held him still, filling him with cock. When he thrust, T.J. took it, opened his throat, and welcomed the stretch of the burn. He did almost nothing except swiping his tongue along salty-clean skin and letting MacGowan fuck his mouth slow, slow, slow.

Somewhere between the tick of the clock and the tempered roll of MacGowan's hips, it happened. Warmth not of any man or man's devising suffused the air and slowed time. The air went as thick and golden as syrup, and breathing it thinly through his nose made T.J.'s mind slow down even as his thoughts floated, airy as a cloud.

MacGowan went still. "What's...?"

It's like drowning in opium, T.J. thought drowsily. It's MacGowan doing this, don't know why, don't know how. He won't know either.

Fight it, or enjoy it. His choice to make.

He let MacGowan's cock slide free of his mouth and rose to stand, the wetness of precum and saliva on his naked belly. He found MacGowan's mouth and fed MacGowan's taste back to him on his tongue, languid as the night was long.

"More," he breathed over MacGowan's lips. "I've got you. Won't let anything hurt you. Let it be good."

MacGowan shivered, once, and stilled, smoothed out, soft and pliant except where he was hard and jutted out. "Yes," he said.

"Anything you want, it's yours," T.J. promised.

MacGowan sifted touches as ephemeral as mist through T.J.'s hair. Though he knew it was impossible, T.J. almost thought they tingled at their ends. Static, magic, something. "Whatever you want, that's what I want too."

T.J. knew he told the truth. The silence and stillness were getting to him, tempered still by the amber stillness, but it wouldn't last forever.

But he'd stretch this out as long as he possibly could. Enjoy every second of it, and make damned sure MacGowan did too. One to remember, right?

When he listened, T.J. could hear MacGowan's heartbeat begin to speed. Underneath the spell he'd cast, somehow, MacGowan was starting to recognize the surrealism, and soon, he'd panic. Wasn't going to happen, not on T.J.'s watch.

T.J. drew in a deep breath of the enchantment, absorbed it into his skin, and then shared it with MacGowan as he had the taste of his own cock, lips to lips and tongue to

tongue, hands pressed to chi points he'd never have been able to pick out on a map before now. He knew the understanding wasn't his. As long as it worked, he didn't care.

MacGowan stilled. Sweat moistened his skin, and if T.J. could have seen him—and if he'd wanted to, he knew he could have—it would have been like looking at MacGowan colored by licking flames from a hearth, light and shadow and the sheen of perspiration burnishing him.

T.J. knew what they both wanted, and he burned for it. "There's lube in my back pocket," he said, aware that there wasn't any, but when MacGowan fumbled around his hip, he found what he wanted where he wanted it.

"Let me do this," he told MacGowan. Arms loose at his sides—in T.J.'s mind's eye, MacGowan's eyes were open but hooded and his lips parted as he watched him—MacGowan let T.J. draw his jeans down, and stayed still except for haphazard, silken-sleek touches to T.J.'s skin as he bared it, taking off his clothes.

They stood naked, body to body. T.J. couldn't tell how much time had passed. He guessed it didn't matter here. Seconds, hours, years; could be they were playing Rip Van Winkle and they'd come to in the year 3010. Still didn't matter. He took MacGowan's hand, the one with the bottle of lube held loosely, and cracked open the lid. "Use it."

"Turn around," MacGowan said, voice thick as the air. He pushed T.J., his touch already slippery with the lube he'd drizzled over his fingers. "Don't say no."

"Not now, not ever," T.J. said, and meant it. "Whatever you want, it's yours."

The words tasted like a true promise, and T.J. knew, somewhere in the back of his mind, that might have been a spectacularly bad idea.

He still didn't care, not when MacGowan's hand spanned his ass and slipped in the cleft to drag rough fingertips over his hole. He wouldn't have cared if the world stopped turning, not as long as MacGowan kept going.

MacGowan worked him open fast and slow at once, twist-burn-stretch, his touch crossing and spiraling in a way that couldn't be real, but was, in its way. Fat drops of sweat struck T.J.'s back and burned their way down. The insistent push of MacGowan's cock against his ass drove T.J. mad, knowing that could be in him and wondering why exactly it wasn't already there.

"You ready?" MacGowan asked at last, too soon, already moving. He took T.J. by the body, somewhere around the waist, the shoulders—T.J. couldn't tell—and carried him to the floor with MacGowan on bottom and T.J. poised over him. It'd felt like floating, like feathers dropped from a cliff's edge, but the landing was light as thistledown.

T.J. steadied himself by pressing on MacGowan's chest and felt it rise and fall slowly, as if he were dreaming. Maybe they both were. It'd explain a lot. It'd fucking figure if they were both passed out just inside MacGowan's apartment, but then again, when a guy knew anything could happen, it was best to roll with what came next.

He made a questioning noise, to which MacGowan chuckled and stroked his arms. "I liked this best, before," MacGowan said. "I liked seeing you. I wanted —"

T.J. pressed his finger to MacGowan's lips before MacGowan could finish. Would have been too much. Instead of hearing MacGowan out, he levered himself up. "Shhh."

Without being told, MacGowan held himself steady for T.J. to sink down and take his cock as deep as he wanted, as deep as he could go. Split himself open and stuffed himself full, the stretch and burn turning his blood to fire and his bones to gold. No matter that he couldn't see; he still closed his eyes, and he rode MacGowan in time with the rise and fall of the languid, impossible lotus spell.

His nails skidded over MacGowan's chest. No, not nails. Claws, sharp-tipped cat's claws that furrowed MacGowan's skin and drew tiny dots of blood to the surface, stinging hot and liquid beneath T.J.'s touch. MacGowan hissed at the sudden sharp scratch, and T.J. knew, a second too late, what he'd done.

Light, real light, flooded in. Streetlights, lamps, even a dusty jar candle with a bent lid flared to life and left them staring at each other with nothing they could hide, with MacGowan buried in T.J. as far as he could go. Wide-eyed as a deer, staring at T.J. in something too close to horror, MacGowan froze.

"No way." T.J. pushed him down and held him there. "Don't think. Don't stop. Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain." He groaned helplessly. "Don't listen to what I'm saying. This, what we have, it's good, right?" He rolled his hips tight and forward and leaned down to fit his mouth to MacGowan's. He ate MacGowan's shout and took it in as he did MacGowan's cock, his body stretched as tight as it could to fit both in.

MacGowan's face creased, his mouth open wide beneath T.J.'s. He gripped T.J.'s hips with force that'd leave fingerprint-shaped bruises, marks he could carry with him, same as he'd marked MacGowan. Without the spell to slow them down, to fuck without time or cares or urgency beyond which they wanted, human urgency in the real world crashed over them as they crashed together. The slap of flesh and the pungent ripeness of sex were almost as dizzying as the pace MacGowan set, the one T.J. followed, straining toward the end. He sank his teeth into the meat of his cheek and tasted blood, but didn't stop. It was closer to fighting than fucking, best sex of his life, somehow, and there could never be enough no matter how long it took to finish.

Nowhere near as long as he wanted. T.J.'s chest spasmed, his body clenched, and he came, painting creamy white stripes over MacGowan's chest and belly. He hadn't even finished, cock jerking between them, when he *had* to pin MacGowan down and crush him with body and kiss. Streaks of cum smeared and smudged between their bodies.

"More," MacGowan chanted, over and over, into T.J.'s kiss. "More, don't stop, more—" He broke in a strangled cry and lifted them both with the arch of his body, then brought them down with a crash and filled T.J. once more.

The last tiny drops of magic melted into the air and were gone. T.J. pressed his face to MacGowan's chest, his own cum smeared on his chin and MacGowan's cum leaking out, dripping thick and sticky down MacGowan's still half-hard cock. He wasn't going to look. Didn't want to.

"T.J.?" MacGowan pushed T.J., trying to dislodge him. "T.J., what just happened? I—" He started to shake. "I think I—God, T.J., would you look at me?"

T.J. shook his head and kept his mouth shut. It wouldn't be truly over until he opened his awareness to the world around him. Maybe he could stay forever.

Bang!

The assault—no way could anyone call that a knock—at MacGowan's door nearly made T.J. jump out of his skin, and things being the way they were, it was a hell of an effort not to check for tail, fangs, and fur when the lurch of alarm settled.

"What the—" MacGowan rolled away and up to his knees. "Calm down out there. Who is it?"

Bang! "MacGowan, let me in this goddamn second or I'm kicking it in."

T.J. found himself crouched in front of MacGowan, guarding him, with no idea how he'd gotten there, only knowing that it was where he had to be. "Is that Shavey? It's kind of hard to tell what with the fiery wrath." *No, wait, that's status quo for him. "I mean, psychotic frothing." Wait, no...*

"He's my friend," MacGowan said, and nothing more. There didn't have to be. T.J. saw that in an abrupt, blinding flash: once you'd worked your way into MacGowan's heart or if he'd given it freely, he didn't see any flaws. He couldn't, not unless they bit him in the ass, and by then it'd be too late.

T.J. hesitated. This was one of those crossroads in a guy's life, wasn't it? Probably one where he didn't have a choice which way he turned.

Bang! Bang! Bang! The hammering at the door almost, but not quite, drowned out the clangor of Arden shouting at Shavey. Probably hanging on like a tick on a Great Dane's nape, T.J. guessed. "And that's my friend," he muttered.

"Get up," MacGowan urged. He helped T.J. to his feet. "Tuck and zip, *quick*. Shavey's serious about breaking the door down. He did it once when he thought I was in trouble."

T.J. fought with his zipper, the metal teeth of which seemed alarmingly too close to his cock in a time of crisis. He left the top button of his fly undone. No time left, and his hands weren't steady. He ran them over the top of his head and stood back, MacGowan still behind him. At least he could enjoy *this*. He raised his voice and shouted, "It's *unlocked*, you idiot!"

MacGowan cringed audibly behind him. "Bad idea."

"I know." T.J. squared off. "Bring it, big guy." *That is, as long as you bring it to me, not him.*

The clamor and din ceased abruptly. The knob turned, as if Shavey couldn't believe either the brass or the balls. Hesitation ended with a hard shove, one that sent the cheap door rebounding against the facing wall and back into Shavey's moose-sized shoulder, which had about as much effect as smacking an ox with a flyswatter.

Shavey took two steps inside. Silent ones. The suspense made T.J.'s palms itch. He watched, waited for it, and knew the precise second when the shit hit the fan. Shavey's nostrils flared, his eyes took on the mad redness of a charging bull, and he said, far too calmly, "It stinks like sex in here."

His fist caught T.J. in the jaw. T.J. didn't feel the pain until he was on the ground and spitting blood from a loosened tooth and a split lip. All around him, people were ranting, raving, and moving so rapidly they blurred—or possibly that was just his vision out of whack. He shoved his uncooperative limbs together to stand, and only missed a punch to the nose by Arden sinking his teeth into Shavey's ham-sized wrist.

Shavey yelped like a little girl when he was in pain. Satisfying. He snarled and shoved Arden, who hung on for bloody dear life; MacGowan, behind them, shouted something T.J.'s ringing ears couldn't make out. He pushed Shavey, caught him by the waist, and tried to haul him back.

T.J.'s ears popped just in time for him to hear Shavey snarl, "I *told* you he wasn't a good guy. Ask him who's Sur Lune. Go on, ask about Sur Lune."

"*Sur Lune?*" T.J. blurted, disbelieving. Then, in horror and comprehension, "Arden, what the hell did you say about Sur Lune?"

Shavey shook Arden off. "Do that again, and we're next," he threatened.

Arden sneered at him. "Punch my pal again, and your cock's the next on my bite list."

Shavey paused, but not long enough. He didn't know Arden well enough yet to know Arden really did mean that. *Ah, friends.* "Go on," he goaded MacGowan. "Ask lover boy here about this Sur Lune guy who sneaks in and out of T.J.'s place upstairs. Ask why he's always got a window open somewhere for Sur Lune to crawl through."

Crap. There was no way to explain this. None. Not without telling MacGowan—telling him everything—and MacGowan had hesitated, for a second, but *that* was long enough, staring at T.J. with the question written on his face.

"I'm not cheating on you," T.J. said, quiet and low. "Listen to me. You know I'm not lying about that."

The question faded. MacGowan believed him, and so willingly it made T.J.'s heart ache.

With reassurance came action. "Leave him alone." MacGowan pushed his way between T.J. and Shavey. T.J. shoved at him, as did Shavey, but the object of their affections stuck stubbornly in the middle like a burr on a dog.

"Let me past. I'm gonna break his neck—"

"You don't get to come into *his* house, over *his* wishes, and attack *him* over me—"

"I'll kick both your sets of nuts up through your noses if you don't settle the fuck down—" Arden chimed in.

"Stop it," MacGowan said, with the sort of quiet desperation that carries through any amount of yelling. Or maybe that was the magic. "Stop it. I said, *stop*—"

The lights flickered. Walls rumbled. Outside, a cat—probably Sur Lune—screeched and wailed. Smoke curled off the carpet, and no one noticed except T.J. Not even MacGowan. Not even when fire began to lick at his heels and climb his legs; it needed direction he couldn't give it. Hadn't burned him yet, but without a master, fire would run wild; it'd burn MacGowan, the flames blue, and no one was going to see a fiery thing until he'd already charred—

This was the crossroads, and T.J. made his choice without letting himself think. He tackled MacGowan from the side and took him down, away from the fire that burned on where he'd stood. Falling seemed to take forever, and the rush of assistance T.J. transferred through MacGowan hurt as much as if he'd been the one burned.

They landed, MacGowan beneath T.J., and T.J. atop him with four sets of claws snarled in his clothes.

Chapter Nineteen

It was one of those moments where everything stopped, frozen in a tableau of the worst possible come true. The tips of T.J.'s claws pierced, barely, MacGowan's chest. Shavey's arm hung in the air, not held back or shoved away by Arden, who hung on to it. The column of fire that had clung to MacGowan's legs neither crackled nor flickered.

And as for MacGowan, he stared at T.J., stunned with disbelief – or worse, fear.

The fire hissed and fell to the carpet in a flurry of ashes, the clock ticked, T.J. breathed, and the world moved forward. So did he, launching himself off MacGowan, past Shavey, past Arden, out the door, and into the night.

They'd seen, they'd seen, they knew, no going back now. So he wouldn't. He lunged forward and didn't stop until he was caught in the thicket at the far edge with brambles and thorns pinning him down.

T.J. yowled and fought the briars, only to have them dig in deeper and sharper. Rabbit kicks didn't work, and neither did biting them; the thorns sank into the roof of his mouth and lashed his underbelly.

Sur Lune's sickly yellow-green eyes appeared first, and then the malignant rest of him, like the Cheshire cat in reverse, only more disturbing. *"What's this?"* he purred, sweet as bitter almonds. *"Lover boy knows, doesn't he?"*

T.J. was beyond words. He lashed at Sur Lune and, somehow, by some stroke of luck or ill chance, raked his claws over Sur Lune's nose. Sur Lune screeched, an ungodly caterwaul, and reared back. His ears flattened and he bared his teeth. *"I told you. I told you, and now you want to bloody me? Brat, I tried to help you!"*

"You made this happen," T.J. snarled, fighting harder and getting nowhere near free. *"What did you do? Got a second's worth of being human and whispered in Shavey's ear? What? Tell me."*

"Idiot." Sur Lune growled low and dangerous, his tail whipping back and forth. "Arden talked. Arden always talks. I heard him say my name; I came."

Stunned, T.J. fell still. Sur Lune was on him in that second, sharp teeth tearing—the briars. Ripping them loose. *"Hurry,"* Sur Lune urged. *"Run! If you get far enough, they can't catch you; if you go deep enough, they won't be able to follow. Run@!"*

Behind them, thick and garbled as if they were speaking from under water, T.J. heard Shavey muttering, Arden shouting his name, loud and panicked, and breathing that he knew as well as his own. MacGowan, silent, power sliding out before him with questing tendrils that'd be there any second.

Sur Lune was no fool; he sensed them too and stopped to spit out a mouthful of thorns. *"Fools for love only belong in songs. They have no place in the real world."*

"Maybe so. I thought you had it all figured out. Thought being a cat for keeps was the smart way to go."

Sur Lune reared. *"What?"*

T.J. bared his teeth. *"I'll stay this way. I'll go be a cat for him. It'd make us all happy—"*

Sur Lune went bananas. *"Fool!"* The briars cleared away, unfurling with unnatural speed; T.J. didn't have time to see more than a hint from the corner of his eye before Sur Lune was on him. Stronger, tougher, meaner, sharp in tooth and red in claw, strong claws that ripped at his belly and his throat, claws that would tear out his neck and open his gut and—

Above them, the briars parted; cold air blasted across wounds and blood-matted fur. Without fear, MacGowan caught Sur Lune by the nape and lifted him. *"This is Sur Lune,"* he said, his voice wrecked. *"Isn't it?"*

"Yeah," Arden said, somewhere out of sight. *"He was one of us, only he fucked up a long time ago. He's like T.J., only he's stuck. He's why the window's left open."*

From somewhere dim and painful, T.J. thought he could hear Shavey's silence and the chagrin mixed with revulsion. He tried to turn his muzzle away but couldn't, the furrows from Sur Lune's claws drawing a pitiful mew from him, all that he was capable of.

MacGowan did—something. Sur Lune disappeared. The sound of a cat shrieking in mad wrath, somewhere far away, was all that remained of him, though he wasn't gone for good. T.J. knew that.

Gentle hands lifted T.J. from the thorns, and a strong heartbeat thudded beneath his ear. The smell of MacGowan surrounded him, even when his weight grew suddenly too heavy, too great for MacGowan to hold, and MacGowan dropped him. T.J. landed naked on human feet, stumbled against MacGowan. MacGowan caught him by his upper arms. *"My God,"* he breathed.

He couldn't take that. *"Now you know,"* T.J. said, barely louder than a whisper. The scratches weren't as deep on a man, but they burned like hell and smeared his

blood over MacGowan to mark him in a macabre pattern. He couldn't look MacGowan in the eye. "Now you know everything. Go away."

MacGowan, silent, touched the tips of his fingers to the scratches T.J. hadn't even noticed on his face. Bites. His breath caught, and his grip loosened, and T.J. knew as if he'd heard the words out loud. *You lied to me. What are you? Who are you? I don't even know you.*

"Go away," T.J. breathed. His legs were weak and his arms wouldn't cooperate, but he took one step back, then two, and MacGowan let him do it. He shut his eyes, concentrated, and the world grew around him.

He knew MacGowan would never forget the sight, and T.J. didn't want him to, because when he fled to his apartment and through the window into the dark, MacGowan didn't follow him this time. Arden came up later, alone, when he sat human and naked and shivering in the tub. Didn't say a word or offer anything more than silent apology and first aid. He knew too.

MacGowan knew what he was. And he'd let T.J. run away.

Chapter Twenty

Time passed. It had an irritating habit of doing that.

MacGowan didn't come after him.

One night spent in his bed with a fever, teeth rattling, and no sound at all from the apartment below T.J.'s. T.J. didn't want him to come, that night.

Two nights, hot tea and honey sliding sickly sweet down his abused throat. The bruises MacGowan had left on him, along with the memory of his taste and the crush of his lips, the smell of sex and the sense of the play of muscles beneath his skin, all faded from sore and dark to pale, and then were gone. Sur Lune's scratches and bites stayed, bright and crude and inflamed.

And MacGowan didn't come after him. There were noises in his apartment, sometimes. T.J. thought he heard Mr. Jontan down there a few times. Once or twice, Arden, but always before Arden came up to him and said nothing.

He knew he heard Shavey, once, speaking low and fast and desperate, trying to convince MacGowan of something. Might have been an apology, might have been his attempt to understand. Who knew? T.J. found his iPod and turned the volume up as high as he could stand, the thrumming of drums that made his eardrums throb better than listening to Shavey twist MacGowan's head.

He didn't go after MacGowan, either.

A week went by. Sur Lune sometimes howled, hissed, and snarled outside the windows T.J. kept shut and locked. He never stayed long, and after a week and a half, he stopped trying to get inside.

And MacGowan stayed downstairs. And T.J. stayed upstairs.

Mr. Jontan came to check on T.J.'s battle scars. He was as clinical and precise as any professional doctor, didn't offer any hey-presto cures, and told T.J. some of those

scars would stay with him for the rest of his life. Something about magically inflicted and “crossing the divide”; T.J. tuned him out around then.

The phone rang. Sometimes. Either T.J. heard it or he didn’t. Once, he was close enough to his closed cell phone to read the caller ID panel.

MacGowan.

He let it ring through and go to voice mail, and then he dropped the thing into his toilet tank. Whatever MacGowan had to say to him, he didn’t want to hear it. He already knew, thanks, and he could do without actually listening.

Not quite as easy as it sounded. Who knew what it was made of, but T.J. would recommend it for plating on cars. Nearly indestructible. Took three flushes before it died.

Not long after that—maybe an hour?—Arden threatened to finish twisting T.J.’s ear off if he didn’t climb out of his “fucking weeping Victorian maiden wasting away in a damned garret” mood. T.J. ignored him until he went away. It wasn’t as if Arden was right. He wasn’t pining or playing emo rock on his iPod, which he was starting to consider having surgically attached for convenience.

He didn’t feel *anything*. Just a numbness, and the emptiness of a hole somewhere. The absence of himself.

Let it go, people. Just let it the fuck go.

Around the end of the second week, he felt it—the tug, the pull. MacGowan, downstairs, using what he’d learned. Taking small steps. Testing his limits. Trying, as it would only be natural for a wizard with a familiar, to call on his helper’s strength.

Sucked to be him; T.J. didn’t have any to give. He wasn’t tempted to shift forms once. It took another day, and he’d learned what it felt like when he stared at the wall and the wall stared back to read the writing there. He couldn’t change unless MacGowan commanded it, and MacGowan wasn’t going to.

He lifted a glass of burning amber whiskey to Sur Lune in a salute and wished him a speedy journey on the express shuttle to hell, then drank it down.

And MacGowan didn’t come after him. And T.J. didn’t go to him.

Three weeks, and that was as long as it lasted. To be fair, T.J. hadn’t expected friends like his would let it go on that long.

* * * * *

Shavey didn’t bother knocking. On the one hand, T.J. supposed that might have been an attempt to negate the pounding he’d done last time, in which case T.J. thought he’d like a chance to negate a lost molar by hammering on Shavey’s giant bull face for a while.

When he suggested as much, Shavey frowned at him. “Huh?”

"You're not that bright, are you?" T.J.'s legs ached from sitting tailor-style on his couch. He let the remote fall to his knee. Emeril chose that moment to shout "Bam!"

Huh. Scratch Emeril off his "favorites" list. He'd been in search of any recipe that didn't involve tuna in any way, and Shavey had to go screw it up.

Shavey helped, in his way, by clicking off the TV on his way to standing in front of it. Which he did in near-total silence, arms crossed while he glared at T.J.

"Is that supposed to intimidate me?" T.J. asked. He wondered if infrared could penetrate the bulk of Shavey's body. *Huh*. Apparently not.

"Do I have to take that away from you or stick it through what's left of your neck?" Shavey held out one beefy hand as if he expected T.J. to hand the remote to him.

Mine. Go get your own. T.J. did not clutch the remote to his chest as he first wanted to. Instead, he stuck it under his ass. "Come and get it if you want to try." With luck, the maneuver would give Shavey a moment's pause, or freak him out enough to make him go away.

Come to think about that... "Why are you here?" T.J. asked, tired of dicking around. "You got what you wanted. I'm a liar, I'm a freak, and I'm out of MacGowan's life. I'm staying out. Flushed my phone and everything."

Shavey wrinkled his nose. "That's disgusting."

T.J. hooted, the laughter at immediate risk of spiraling out of control. "Everything that's gone on, and *that's* what gets a reaction out of you? Besides threatening to break my face, that is?" He wiped the corners of his eyes. "We both know this is for MacGowan's good."

"He doesn't," Shavey said bluntly.

T.J. sobered. "You've got five seconds. Either tell me what you want, or we'll see if you scratch up as pretty as I did."

Ah, there was the Shavey he knew. Fists at his sides, hating every second of this. "I still think you're an asshole, and you're a liar."

T.J. nodded soberly. "Really? Thanks for enlightening me."

"Shut up. I'm not done."

T.J. shrugged and gestured for him to get on with it. If his hand shook a little, he wasn't going to mention it, and either Shavey couldn't focus on objects that were comparatively small or he had a smidgen of tact in his personality. It was anybody's guess.

"But you lied to try and protect MacGowan, not hurt him," Shavey said through gritted teeth. "You did the best you could. I get that now."

His words came out garbled, but T.J. got the gist. Got it like a fist to the gut, and he had a good recent memory to compare that to. He sat up straight, baffled, and studied Shavey like he would a caterpillar that'd just turned into a crow instead of a moth.

"You look like a fish out of water," Shavey informed him.

"Great. Are you done?" T.J. tucked his hands under his pits to keep them still. "Yes. I tried to protect him and failed. I gave it the old college try, hurray. Still blew up in our faces. Or did you forget that part?"

"If you don't shut up and listen, I'm going to pinch your mouth shut."

"Ahh, now you sound like yourself. I wondered if you were a pod person."

Shavey took a step toward him, massive paw raised. T.J. glared at him and hissed. A human hiss, through a human's set of vocal cords, really kind of sucked in comparison to the real thing.

"Don't even try," Shavey said. He came to a stop close enough to do the promised damage. "I know you're a cat...thing." He made a face. "I still think it's fucking insane, just so you know."

"Noted."

A vein darkened at Shavey's temple. "It's real. I was wrong. So you should have answered the phone," Shavey said. "He misses you."

T.J. almost weakened. Almost. "No. Move your ass. There's a BBC comedy marathon on next."

Shavey snorted. "This isn't who you are. I'm big, and people think I'm stupid, but I'm not. You see the suit? I day-trade. I'm rich enough to buy you if I want. And by the way, don't even think about trying to scratch me, because I know you can't change shape anymore."

He had T.J.'s full attention. "How do you —"

Shavey raised one shoulder. "Because MacGowan told me so. And him, I believe. That's why I'm here. He hasn't said he misses you, but I know him, and he's not watching daytime TV. He's miserable. He wants you back, and if you don't get your ass down there and kiss and make up, I'm going to finish kicking your ass out the other side of your body. Understood?"

T.J. regarded Shavey thoughtfully, at the end of which pause he said, "I thought your kind had to be invited inside. If I uninvite you, will you go away or just burst into flame?"

Shavey loosed a sound that naturally went with throwing one's hands in the air. "Screw you. I *told* Arden this wouldn't work. You get one more chance with my boy, T.J., and you get one warning. This was it. Grow a pair and grow up."

T.J. shook his head. "It's better for both of us if I don't go near MacGowan again. Stop pretending different."

Shavey's silence was enough of an answer.

"You're a good friend to him for trying, though." T.J. pointed to the door. "Don't let it smack you in the ass on your way out, unless you're into that, that is. Bye, now."

It should have been satisfying to send Shavey packing with his tail sort of between his legs and his temper boiling over but under control.

Not too surprisingly to T.J., it completely wasn't.

* * * * *

"You know, I'd thought fucking a man would make life less dramatic." Arden thumped down on the couch beside T.J. A puff of Cheetos dust rose around him. "For fuck's sake. You couldn't eat ice cream by the pint like any normal teenage girl?"

T.J. gave him the finger and moved to the chair by the window. "You'd have rather sat down in a melted puddle of Chunky Monkey instead? And you're still with Shavey? What are you, a glutton for punishment?"

"If you call enjoying a good fuck punishment—and you probably would—then call me a masochist, my son." Arden stretched out. He was more of a cat than T.J. was sometimes, the casual loungeur. "You're a miserable, mooney bastard, you know that?"

T.J. pounded the heels of his hands against his forehead. "I am not moping. Why does everyone keep telling me that?"

Arden huffed. "I don't know. Maybe because you're *moping*? And driving the rest of us, by which I mean me and Shavey, bugnuts insane while you're at it? Mr. Jontan, who knows about him, but anyway, MacGowan's doing a better job of coping than you are."

"Oh, yeah?" T.J. arched one eyebrow. "So what's he doing right now?"

Arden stuttered to a halt. He sat up and sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck. "Uh...I think he's halfway through memorizing Mr. Jontan's family heirloom *Booke of Herbs*, looking up the arcane properties of, um, catnip. That's 'booke' with a stupid dangling *E* on the end, by the way, and an *F* instead of an *S*. Book-ey of Herb-ffff."

T.J. licked cheesy orange dust off his forefinger. "Catnip. So? Did someone let you have sugar again?"

"Don't play dumb."

"Not playing."

"He's trying to lure you to him."

"Noted. Since I'm still here, I'd say it's not working out so well for him. And you were saying what about thinking fucking a man would make life easier? How do those second thoughts feel?"

"Nonexistent. Shut up and listen to me," Arden said.

Uh-oh. That kind of distraction usually worked better. Arden *should* have gone off on a rant about drama queens and kings and exactly how Shavey drove him up the wall, because that was what good Ardens did. Did he? Nope. He crossed one leg over the other, ankle on his knee, the bendy bastard, and treated T.J. to the kind of long, level look he'd only ever encountered before from nuns and Mr. Jontan when T.J. had done something equally stupid as risking a nun's wrath.

"You wouldn't hear it from an enemy," Arden said, level and smooth and as serious as T.J. had ever seen him. "So hear it from a friend. You're being a fucking idiot. And so is he."

"Yeah, and coming from the king of fools that means a hell of a—what did you say?" The sensation of phantom ears pricking forward made T.J.'s head buzz. "That last part. 'So is he' what?"

"And you say you're not being a girl," Arden scoffed. "Yeah, he's learning magic, what he can do, getting stronger, we have the technology, blah, blah, blah. Has he smiled, even once? Said so much as a 'hey, neato' when the gnomes—"

"Cockroaches," T.J. mumbled.

"—came out to say hello, which means they like him a hell of a lot, because gnomes don't *do* that. Seriously, it's against their code. If they broke it to say howdy and didn't run away after, they think he's worth sticking around for."

"Then he's got company."

"You're not listening to me."

"Mostly because you're not making any sense. But what gave it away?"

Arden's foot bounced in an impatient if muffled *rat-a-tat-tat* on his knee. "You're doing this on purpose. You don't want to hear how he misses you, probably more than you miss him from what I see. I know you, T.J. You think pretending to be a bastard will convince people to hate you, and then it'll be their idea to go away, and that'll get you off without it hurting so much."

"That's nowhere near true."

"No?" Arden retorted. "That's how it looks from here, and just so you know, it's not working. He's miserable, thinking you don't care about him, and guess what? I'd bet that under that whole facade you've got thrown up, which is probably as durable as an eggshell, that you miss him like there's a hole ripped out of you."

T.J. lifted his hand to his chest but shook his head stubbornly. "You don't have a clue, Arden." *Liar, liar, pants on fire.* "Get out."

Arden started to say something, stopped, shook his head, and stood. He dusted Cheetos powder off his jeans and shot T.J. an annoyed look that was part his old self with a healthy amount of bullish Shavey scorn mixed in. "If you think the campaign's over, you're sorely mistaken. None of us are going to sit by and let you two idiots wither away because each of you is too proud to admit you think the other one hates you."

"Wait. MacGowan thinks I hate him? Arden!" T.J. unfolded his legs and made a bolt for it, aiming between Arden and the door. Too used to being curled up tight for hours at a time, they gave out and sent him tumbling with a mighty *clatter* and *thump*.

"He does," Arden said, already halfway out the door. "Suck on that one for a while, would you? Oh, and look who's here. It's our friendly neighborhood psychokitty. I'll just leave the door open so you two can have a nice chat. Peace out, Sur Lune."

* * * * *

"You look like shit and you smell like garbage." Sur Lune sat with his tail twined around his feet. *"I have words for you."*

Now, why didn't T.J. think any of those were going to be "sorry" or "get well soon"? He was going to throttle Arden for this. Slowly. He might even bring popcorn for anyone who wanted to settle in and watch the show.

If he survived this encounter with psychokitty, that was. What was their plan, anyway, to have Sur Lune chase him downstairs into MacGowan's loving arms, which, by the way, he thought were about as likely to be waiting for him as seventy-two naked virgins?

Sur Lune extended one limb to place his paw, claws out, ever so gently on T.J.'s nose. *"I have words. Will you shut up and listen or do I have to teach you another lesson?"*

T.J. focused on the claws. Had to cross his eyes to manage it, but he suspected it was worth the effort.

"Are you paying attention now?"

"You could say so, yeah."

"Hmph." Sur Lune lifted the corner of his lip to show T.J. his fangs.

Honest to God, he never did know when to keep his mouth shut. "If you're here to tell me I'm being a moron, that point's already been made."

"It bears repeating."

Something odd about Sur Lune's communications filtered in. "You're eloquent," T.J. said slowly. He sniffed. "And you're still clean."

"A wizard has chosen to form a working relationship with me. It amuses me to play along for now."

And if that didn't just put the cherry on top of the frosting? "You've got to be kidding me."

"I am not. Mr. Jontan is quite companionable when you get to know him." Sur Lune licked his chops. *"And powerful."*

T.J. boggled. "Quite? Did you just say quite? I hit my head when I fell, didn't I? I'm dreaming."

The tip of Sur Lune's claw came a hairbreadth away from piercing T.J.'s nostril. *"Does this feel like a dream?"*

"You should see some of the dreams I've had," T.J. retorted. He drew back lickety-split and sat up, hand in front of his face. "For God's sake, Sur Lune, wizard or not—hurray for you—you of all people should know what the deal is here. We are what we are. There was probably someone way back when." His stomach did a nasty flip. "If you're here to tell me this happened to you because you fell in love, please don't."

"I will no@. I still have my testicles@."

"And I have a door. It's that way."

"And you have a wizard, who is not a whole wizard without you. Strange things can happen when a wizard and familiar are separated. And no, that is not why I am stuck in this shape. I would rather eat mothballs than tell you, so you might as well stick that question where the sun doesn't shine."

"Strange things. Like what?"

"For one, Mr. Jontan will be the next one to visit you. He has a vested interest in preventing further calamity, and I suspect you know he will stop at nothing once he's truly pissed off." Sur Lune looked back over his shoulder, the tip of his tail waving almost playfully in front of his nose. *"Move it or lose it."*

"There's nothing to move to."

"Not even you believe that. Stupid, stubborn, proud. Idiot."

"If I am, then it's my choice and not yours. And lose what?"

"Everything," Sur Lune said simply and oozed out the door, out of sight.

Chapter Twenty-one

T.J. tapped his knee, gaze turned inward, the swirling mess of his mind coalescing in one giant epiphany. Something along the lines of, *Y'know what? Hell with this.* He'd go down and have it out with MacGowan before the madness went any further. Before Mr. Jontan, of all people, stuck his nose in.

He'd bring it to an end.

T.J. hadn't been outside in days, boxed up in his den licking his wounds, and it was strange to him, how bright the sun seemed. Uncomfortable awareness of looking like a crazy person seeped in as T.J. squinted against the harshness of the late-afternoon sunlight streaming white through sullen gray wisps of cloud. He hadn't shaved since before That Night, had slept on freshly showered hair and ended up with a tangled mess that he might be better off shaving rather than trying to comb. He wore gym shorts, an old T with the logo half-cracked off, and he'd forgotten his shoes.

"Nothing like a great last impression," he muttered and wished his pupils would freakin' go ahead and adjust already.

Below him, something rattled. Sounded like paper. And where there was paper... T.J.'s eyes watered in the effort to get a good look.

Mr. Jontan sat at the bottom of the steps, newspaper in hand, buried in the sports section. T.J. took a moment to play "what's wrong with this picture?" then gave up; he couldn't count that high when he was running on fumes, coffee, and Cheetos.

Of course Mr. Jontan wouldn't kick-start that old conversational ball. Nor would he move his ass before someone presented a logical argument for him to move. "How about those Red Sox?" T.J. asked.

"Beg pardon?" Mr. Jontan turned the page. "If you have a question, I suggest you come out with it. I've had enough drama to last two more lifetimes."

Two more—nope, not gonna touch that one, T.J. decided. “Strange seeing you out here in the day.”

Mr. Jontan turned another page. The brisk crackle silenced all else. The man had skills.

T.J. stewed. “Y’know, I get the point. And it’s not funny.”

“What point would that be?”

“Oh, come *on*.”

“Come on, what? Where?”

What small amount of patience T.J. had left was disappearing at high speed, wizard who could smite him under one thumb or not. “You’re obviously sitting down here blocking the stairs for a reason, so let’s have it. Anything to do with scolding me about MacGowan, maybe?”

Mr. Jontan folded his newspaper. “I have no reason, T.J. I have no rhyme either.”

“It’s weird, I know, but why don’t I believe you right now?”

“What I do have is respect for the choices one makes, whether good or bad or indifferent,” Mr. Jontan went on. He tapped the edges of the newspaper to lie straight and crisp as if they’d just come off the press. “Once made, a choice cannot be unmade.”

“Please. Everyone else has come up for a heart-to-heart whether or not they or I wanted them to. What makes you different? Why do you care?”

Mr. Jontan didn’t turn around to look at T.J., but T.J. felt the full effect of his long, level stare nonetheless. It would have been a great time to shut his yap, but *hell with this*, the refrain echoed. “Ah, right, I get it,” T.J. said. “You’re different because you *don’t* care.”

To himself, he thought, at least you can count on some things.

“I don’t care in the ways that you do,” Mr. Jontan said.

Heedless and possibly maybe slightly crazy enough to be reckless, T.J. scoffed on. “Though the other night, when you said you wouldn’t tell him what I was, I thought maybe you had a heart or something. *Holy—*”

He stumbled, the sun so sharp and bright that it reverberated through his orbital sockets all the way through his head and made his ears burn and his teeth itch.

A steady hand caught him by the elbow and guided him down the stairs. “This hurts me far more than it hurts you,” Mr. Jontan said. “This is, by the way, the truth. You have no idea how bothersome it is to calculate a prism effect strong enough to bedazzle a human-slash-feline-oriented eye without simultaneously blinding them or me, all the while mediating between reason and illogic with my newly acquired and utterly psychotic familiar.” He paused. “The chaos field he brings with him actually works out rather well balanced against my staid ways. I feel quite adventurous.”

“Hurray for you.” T.J. had a bad feeling about this, or would have if he hadn’t been busy freaking out about the “blinding” part.

"Good," Mr. Jontan said when he steadied T.J. on the terra concrete firma. He let go, leaving T.J. dazed and confused, the sound of his voice all T.J. could hear. "Take one step back. Good. One more back." Thoughtful pause. "Two to the left. One back."

T.J.'s legs obeyed without his permission. "If you're going to pull my strings like a puppet, how about you at least fist me first?"

"You're not my type," Mr. Jontan said dryly. "Three more steps back, and the sun will be out of your eyes. One."

T.J. could feel a gaping maw of cool, moldy, damp air at his back. That so didn't bode well. "Where are you walking me to?" At least it wasn't MacGowan's apartment, not unless MacGowan had done a way better job of going cave troll than T.J. had.

"You'll know it when you see it," Mr. Jontan said. "Two."

Stumble-jerk-step. "This isn't funny." T.J. tried to stop and couldn't. Uneasy panic began to bubble in his gut. Mr. Jontan knew better than to back a cat into a corner, especially if he'd taken up with Sur Lune. That was a story T.J. never, *ever* wanted to hear.

"There's a certain humor to the situation that makes it worthwhile," Mr. Jontan said. "Just so you know, I do this with respect. Three."

The blazing, burning whiteness of the sun disappeared in sync with a *whoosh* of shadow, the churned-up air smelling strongly of old spiderwebs and the ghost of fabric softeners past. *The old laundry room?*

"Wait!" T.J. threw himself at the rapidly disappearing patch of dim daylight behind the shutting door. It ground shut just in time for him to bash his nose against it, and for all light, blinding or amiable, to disappear.

Locked in the old laundry room. Locked in. It was dark down there, and there were spiders. Cute. Which he couldn't see to squish until they crawled over him to eat his eyeballs. More to the point, which he got now like a tent stake hammered through his ear, he couldn't change shape and hunt the creepy bastards down, not without MacGowan's permission.

T.J. thought he could still sense Mr. Jontan's presence outside. He slapped the old, rusted metal of the door with the flat of his hand. "I thought you'd had enough drama!"

"I have. Clearly, you are not in the mood to listen to reason, ranting, or rationale. The lot of you are equally stubborn and this situation will persist until doomsday if the regent den father doesn't step in, or so I've been made aware."

"What?"

"Make peace with one another," Mr. Jontan said. "The door remains locked until agreements have been reached and I can go back to peacefully occupying your kitchen alcove. I *like* that alcove."

T.J.'s skin itched. Trapped. In the dark. No way out. Bad times. "What happened to respect?"

"Really, why bother talking?" Mr. Jontan mused outside. "Words are no more than sounds carried via air. Syllables we assign meaning."

"Yeah? Gotta say that's quite the speech for someone talking about how talking is meaningless. Let me out already."

"It's not a speech. It's intent. It's action. I'll leave you to take some."

No further threats, if you didn't count the sound of Mr. Jontan walking away. There didn't need to be. It was almost refreshing. Except for the part where he was locked in a laundry room with flesh-eating spiders and ancient machines that were probably portals to hell, or maybe Cape Cod. What? He hated cod. And the ocean. And he was really starting to freak out now, so if someone out there didn't stop screwing around —

But he wouldn't call for MacGowan. He'd let himself be spider-bitten to death before he'd chew up and swallow the tiny bits of pride he still had to his name. T.J. backed up, away from the door. Something sharp, probably the edge of a rusted-out washing machine, jabbed him in the back. "This isn't funny," he said to himself, a hissed, heated rush under his breath. He hammered the machine with his fist to raise as much racket as he could. "Let me out. This isn't funny!"

Behind him, in the dark, came a small, all-too-familiar voice. "For what it's worth, I'm not laughing either."

MacGowan.

Chapter Twenty-two

There were different kinds of awkward silences in the world. This T.J. knew from experience. The awkward pause when a shape-shifting cat-guy was trapped in an abandoned laundry room with his estranged neophyte-wizard lover had to be in the top ten.

The silence stretched on. T.J. couldn't turn around to look at MacGowan, and not even the jab of the washing machine in the small of his back was going to make him. He studied the tiny window in the upper right corner of the Laundromat graveyard. The tiniest bit of light filtered through, gray and greasy and begrimed. Still a more appealing sight to him than the disappointment and anger that odds were good he'd see in MacGowan if he took the chance.

"T.J.," MacGowan said quietly. Of course he broke first. He was that kind of guy, and it sparked a differently shaded crackle of anger within T.J. "I know you can hear me."

"I'm five feet away. If I couldn't hear you, I'd have bigger things to worry about. Wait, I do." T.J. wiped his hands on his jeans and found them tacky with old cobwebs. He shuddered. "I hate spiders."

"There aren't any in here. There were, but after they trapped me in here, I encouraged all arachnids outside, and I stepped on a couple that didn't want to go."

T.J. laughed. If it sounded more like something hysterical, he wouldn't admit it, not even on his deathbed. "Super. Thanks for the courtesy."

"I knew you could be a jackass sometimes," MacGowan said, still quiet, still small. "I didn't ever think you'd do that to me. Kick me to the curb. Walk away."

Not fair. "Yeah, well. Things change." T.J.'s throat was closing up on him. "People change. I change into a cat. Surprise! It's a strange world we live in, don't you think?"

"T.J., stop." Footsteps; MacGowan was coming closer. T.J. froze. "I didn't mean that literally. You can move if you want. But I wish you wouldn't."

T.J. shook his head. He knew MacGowan could see him as well as he could see the dim outlines of broken-down bits and pieces in the dreary quarter light. He said nothing. What was there *to* say?

"T.J...." MacGowan was almost close enough to touch him now, if he'd wanted to. T.J.'s skin burned with the imagined warmth of him. "Why didn't you come talk to me? Call me? God, T.J., anything would be better than the silent treatment. What did I do to deserve that?"

He sounded warmer now. Gingery, angry. Anger was good; T.J. could work with that. Work him up, make him pissed enough, and maybe they could shout a few things with "get out" included.

"You know something, T.J.? You're an ass. Why didn't you tell me from the start? I wouldn't have —"

"Wouldn't have what?" T.J. interrupted, bitter as lye ash. "Wouldn't have thought I was crazy, wouldn't have walked away yourself?"

"If you don't know I wouldn't have done that, then you don't know *me* as well as I thought you did," MacGowan said, and it stung, pierced T.J. deep as a needle to a nerve. "I've been through some serious crap these past few days, you know that? I find out that I'm some kind of — I don't even know. That maybe there's a reason why I draw danger to me wherever I go, and maybe I could have stopped it if I'd had a clue."

"Danger like me?"

MacGowan overrode that. "I find out there are brownies in my apartment, there are wizards and enablers and handlers and shape-shifters, and I'm dealing with them by myself because you were too much of a pussy to help."

T.J. barked a humorless laugh. "That's me. Meow."

"That's not what I meant." MacGowan's hand closed hard over T.J.'s shoulder and shook him.

T.J. jerked away. "I was trying to protect you," he said dully. The fight drained out of him. "Dumb, I know. And I didn't want you to think I was a freak. D'uh."

"I think we're past that now," MacGowan said. "Tell me the truth. No one else will. They get all shifty-eyed and say it's not their place. All I want is for you to be honest with me. For once. That's all."

T.J. snorted. "I think we're past that too. I'm out of here."

"No," MacGowan said. He sounded farther away than the grasp of his hand. "You're not going anywhere yet."

His wizard spoke; T.J.'s inner familiar heard and obeyed. His feet wouldn't move. Three futile attempts, and he gave up. "What do you want me to say, MacGowan? That I missed you? You believe I didn't *want* to come find you?"

"What other choice did you give me? I heard you flushed your phone down the toilet so I couldn't call. That kind of hurts a guy's feelings."

T.J. gave in. No pride left; no reason not to give it all up. "I needed you. I wanted to see you. If I'd let myself think about it, it would have eaten me alive."

"Why?" The grip on T.J.'s shoulder—he still couldn't tell if it was real or an illusion—loosened. He sensed the soft, encouraging sweep of a thumb rubbing his taut muscle. "You could have come to me. Anytime. I'd have gone to you if I'd thought you'd let me in."

"I missed you," T.J. said. He tried to step away from MacGowan's touch, to no avail. It followed him. "Underneath all of it. The only way to deal with you hating my guts was to—"

"Wait." MacGowan's grip tightened, sharpened. "Since when do I hate you?"

"Since you found out I'd been lying to you all along?" T.J. wrenched free of MacGowan's grip and turned to find MacGowan standing behind him, less than two feet away, slim and solid and not an illusion. "Let's take it from the top. Hi, I'm T.J. Thomas Cattrell Jones. My parents had a rotten sense of humor. They call me T.J. for short. I turn into a tabby cat sometimes, mostly when the moon's waxing, but more often if I want. What can I say? It's a thing."

MacGowan was quiet, considering that. "You could have tried. I might have listened."

"Right, sure, uh-huh. Let me tell you how it would have gone down, and trust me, I know, because it's happened before. If I'd come out with that the first time we met, you, with your grocery cart full of raw meat, would have backed up and run the other direction as fast as you could."

"Maybe," MacGowan said. "Maybe not."

"Don't patronize me."

"You know I'm not. And you think I hate you now, but guess what, T.J.? You're wrong." MacGowan moved forward, into T.J.'s space. T.J. backed away, bashed a new bruise on the washing machine, but MacGowan kept coming. "I don't even hate you a little bit."

T.J. growled and grabbed the tangled mess of curls on the sides of his head. "Stop for a minute. *Stop*. I need to think." *Does not compute*.

"Fine." MacGowan took T.J. by his upper arms, no questioning now that it was his real touch. "As long as you tell me what you're thinking. I'm tired of being left out of the loop. I said I didn't hate you, not that I didn't want to throttle you."

"Get in line."

"T.J." MacGowan touched his face, a strong, sure brush of his fingers. T.J. could, if he tried, *just* see the dim outlines of MacGowan's face, could see his stupid, eager, honest earnestness. "Tell me what you're thinking."

Was it a magical command? Probably not. T.J. still did what MacGowan asked. It boiled inside him and burned its way out. "You asked for it. I don't get you, MacGowan. You can't be okay with this."

"Why not? I can forgive whoever I want."

T.J. reared. "I didn't ask for your forgiveness." Yeah, no, that didn't even sound convincing to him. "I wouldn't have forgiven anyone who played me for a fool the way I did you. No one's that decent. That stupid. Six of one, half a dozen of the other. I don't believe you."

A small silence, a caught whisper of a breath, and then an awful surety when MacGowan said, "Because you don't want to believe me."

T.J. clamped his lips shut and shook his head in mute stubbornness.

MacGowan wouldn't be put off. He ran his palms over T.J., barely connecting as he traced the lines of him from wrists to shoulders, from forehead to throat to chest to hips. Learning him in a new way, as a wizard would, even a new one who could only go with his instincts. Just T.J.'s luck they had to be *good* instincts. A sweep like that hit every chi point on the map and some that weren't. MacGowan knew him inside and out now, and he might be forgiving but he was a stubborn bastard, and he pushed his advantage without shame.

If he wasn't on the verge of a meltdown, T.J. might have been impressed.

"Say you're right." T.J. wouldn't give up, not that easily. "What're you going to do about it?"

"Tell you why," MacGowan said, simple and true.

T.J. tried to back away; MacGowan wouldn't let him. "Stop."

"No. You didn't have a choice. I get that now. Maybe I always did; I can't go back and find out for sure. But you're right. I wouldn't have listened. I'd have chalked you up as crazy, and we probably wouldn't have said another word to each other."

"Like I said."

"But it wasn't up to us. You're my familiar." MacGowan hesitated only a second over the word. "Harry met Sally, and everything went boom. You woke this up, whatever it is, inside me. Everything changed. I became something else too. I would have thought you were crazy, I'd have thought I was going crazy, and I'd probably have di—"

"Don't say that." T.J. covered MacGowan's mouth sharp and hard, MacGowan's lips warm and still beneath his hand. "No way I'd have let you go up in smoke."

MacGowan took T.J. gently by the wrist and moved his hand to speak freely. "No, you wouldn't have. And you didn't. You lied, but only because the truth wasn't a choice. How could I hate you for that?"

"You could if you were, I don't know, *human*."

"I don't think I am, anymore," MacGowan said simply. "I'm one of you."

T.J. hated logic. "It doesn't work that way. It's not that easy—"

"Shhh." MacGowan placed a finger over T.J.'s lips and left it there to keep him silent and unable to protest. "You asked for this, and you're going to get it."

T.J. could sense MacGowan's fear. He knew how much this cost the guy – almost everything he had to give. Broke his heart. He wanted to reach out and make it go away. It was what his nature shouted at him to do.

But he couldn't. Or wouldn't.

How much longer he could hold out, though, that'd be anybody's guess. Maybe, he thought, staring at MacGowan's lips, it'll all hang on what he says. The pit and the pendulum. One more swing and we'll know who we are.

"We are who we are, and we did what we had to. All that's in the past. I left it there. All that I care about right now, T.J., is that I miss you. I tried to talk to you to tell you that. I guess it takes pissing off something stronger than both of us to get us here, and that's fine by me as long as it works." MacGowan bracketed T.J.'s face with his hands and pressed their foreheads together.

"Don't," T.J. said.

"I will. I miss you. I need you."

"As what, a familiar? You can do that long-distance. I'll even throw in some purrs."

"I could. But I don't want to. T.J...." MacGowan touched his mouth to T.J.'s, lingered just long enough to entice, then released him. "I want you. The rest is details."

"It's *not that easy*," T.J. said.

"Why not? Anything's possible. Trust me, I believe that now."

T.J. said nothing. He couldn't think of anything, and by God it took every last ounce of self-control he had not to jump MacGowan. Maybe to hit him, more probably to kiss him. This was what he'd dreaded all his life, falling in love and facing this kind of divide.

The pendulum swung closer.

"I want to start over," MacGowan said, drawing his thumbs over T.J.'s cheekbones, where his whiskers would be when he walked on four feet. "Maybe it'll work, maybe it won't, but I need you. Please."

Something tiny broke inside T.J. A crack in the levee, and it was over. He wanted this. So much. MacGowan made him want to believe.

And if a wizard wanted something, it was a wish that could come true.

And if that wizard was MacGowan, who couldn't lie to save his life, T.J. had to believe him.

MacGowan enfolded T.J. in his arms and let him crumble. "Thank you," he said. "I call do-over. Hope this works."

"What?"

The world went dark.

Chapter Twenty-three

"Let me see."

MacGowan was the one who said it; T.J. was the one whose eyes were opened. The light was too harsh. He could make out the top of MacGowan's head, sepia-ebony hair hanging in his face, and not much else.

Except the tiles on the walls. Clean ones. And the hard coldness of something porcelain under his ass. And a yawning sense of empty bathtub behind him.

Carefully and precisely, T.J. pinched himself on the inner arm. "Ow."

"You're not dreaming," MacGowan said. He glanced up at T.J. through his bangs, a puckish twinkle of humor in his eyes that, if anyone were to ask, T.J. would have to say suited him. "Looks like it worked."

T.J.'s head, not totally caught up to speed, ran through a checklist. He smelled...smoke. Cigarette smoke. The strong aniseed of ouzo and the sharpness of basil and the sweetness of tomatoes.

Also, the stink of the parking lot. He had brambles in his hair and oh, hi, some interesting scratches on his arms and legs. "Boy, these look familiar." T.J. shook off one of MacGowan's hands to raise his arm and examine it. The exact pattern of pain Sur Lune had left on him however-many days ago. He wore the clothes he'd had on that night, and so did MacGowan. If T.J. concentrated, he could catch the faint aroma of illicit alley sex beneath the other smells.

He let MacGowan take his arm back to stroke a warm, damp washcloth over the skin and wipe away the traces of blood. Hurt, but the sting, not surprisingly, wasn't his first priority. He had the strongest urge to first punch MacGowan silly and then to tackle him to the bathroom floor and kiss him stupid. "Do-over, huh?"

MacGowan chuckled. "Worked, didn't it?"

"Sneaky," T.J. said.

"You sound impressed." MacGowan pulled T.J.'s leg into his lap. "Careful you don't lose your balance."

"Like that's not exactly what you wanted. Hell of a way to sweep a guy off his feet, MacGowan." T.J. waved himself quiet. "I am impressed. I'd applaud if I weren't scratched up like someone dragged me backward through a thornbush. Oh, wait."

"Smart-ass." MacGowan plucked a bottle of hydrogen peroxide off the floor beside him and shook it up. "Don't kick me."

"Maybe I won't, if you kiss it better." *Crap.* "Did I just say that out loud?"

"You did." MacGowan cracked open the peroxide and cracked a bright, amused grin at T.J. It was a good look on him. T.J. had almost forgotten.

T.J. studied him, working over the scrapes and scratches he'd earned. "Why are you doing this?"

"I thought a second chance might work better if we went back to where it went wrong."

"Then right about now we should be playing bumper carts."

"That's not where we broke apart. This is." MacGowan blew on one of the scratches rather than scorching it with peroxide. The skin lost its raw, red hue, smoothed out, and the mark disappeared as if it had never existed. "It's where we could have gone right instead of left."

"You're seriously messing around with paradox and continuum and all that jazz."

"Huh. Think I'll get in trouble?" MacGowan put his lips over a bruise. Blissful ease followed a sharp sting, and T.J. wasn't at all surprised to see the dark purpling mark gone when MacGowan sat up. "Mr. Jontan knows, or maybe he suspects."

"Try that again."

"It's the truth. No more lies, not here, not now." MacGowan tickled the arch of T.J.'s bare foot. "Not from me. Not from you, either, okay?"

"I'm supposed to say no to a guy who bent time around like a coat hanger?"

MacGowan held T.J.'s foot between his palms and was otherwise alarmingly still. "Do you want to?"

"No," T.J. said. "God help me, but no, I don't."

MacGowan pressed the balls of his thumbs into the arch of T.J.'s foot. Felt so good that T.J. groaned and curled his toes. "Then tell me the truth?"

There was no reason not to. He'd never reached that point with anyone besides MacGowan, and maybe this was why. Maybe MacGowan was the only one who *could* get through to him. "I'm a cat. And a man. I've been both all my life. I don't think I'm human, but I've never asked to find out for sure, because I don't want to know." His nails dug into his palms, but he made himself go on. This mattered. "The thing I was most scared of was losing you, but I knew it would happen, so I made sure it would. But it was magic, you and I."

"Is magic," MacGowan murmured, skimming a stronger caress up T.J.'s calf.

"Is," T.J. corrected himself. "Present tense."

"Future tense," MacGowan said. "Can be magic. If you let it."

T.J. studied MacGowan. The last stepping stone. Fall or fly. "You honestly meant it when you said you forgave me, didn't you?"

MacGowan nodded, once, and nothing more.

It was easier than T.J. would have thought it'd be, to let it go. Funny how that seemed to happen around MacGowan, when he didn't stand in the way. "You ever hear of the butterfly effect? Just in case this brings about the end of the world, then I'll skin you alive."

MacGowan tipped back his head and laughed. God, it sounded good to T.J. "Fair enough." He blew a stream of cool air over the last of the damage Sur Lune had wrought, leaving no blemish or scar in his wake. "You're a cat. A familiar. My familiar. I'm a wizard." He wrinkled his nose. "That gets more surreal every time I say it."

"You're tellin' me." T.J. pushed idly at MacGowan's stomach with his bare toes. Something warm and golden had begun to fill him, like the opium light that'd surrounded them that last time. As the temperature climbed, he began to want, he himself and no one else, and knew what he wanted. MacGowan. Always and forever, MacGowan.

"Mr. Jontan says I don't have to wear robes or a hat. You have no idea what a relief that is."

T.J. couldn't hold back a whoop of a laugh. "Same here. You'd look like a Barnum and Bailey reject in that getup." He moistened his lips. "I like you better with nothing on at all."

MacGowan's eyebrows zoomed up to disappear beneath his hair. "Forthright."

"It's what you asked for." T.J. let the golden glow fill him. Inside himself, he purred; outside himself, he held out his hand for MacGowan to take. Together, they got to their feet. "How long can we stay here, in the past? Is there a time limit, or do we really live the next few days the way they should have been lived?"

"It's up to you," MacGowan said.

"I'm not crazy about reliving the past. I'd rather do it right in the future. The now. Whatever." MacGowan was almost close enough to kiss. T.J. considered it impressive that he managed to hold out long enough to speak his piece. "I think we should stay just long enough so no one can overhear us before we're done."

"So no one can overhear what?"

T.J. looped his arms around MacGowan's neck. "Three guesses, and the first two don't count," he said. "And keep the lights on. I want you to see all of me."

"I always will, now," MacGowan said and kissed him. "Oh God. Don't take this the wrong way, but you're filthy."

"Thanks, I think." T.J. ducked and dodged to bite MacGowan's jaw, nibbling up the firm jut to the soft spot between cheekbone and mouth. "I can get dirtier if this is too vanilla for you."

"Not even close." MacGowan shifted position, brought them one step closer, fully together. "I meant you're covered in mulch, dirt, and blood."

"You picked the time and the place. Your fault."

MacGowan clicked his tongue. "Maybe I wanted us to take a shower together." The pressure of MacGowan's dick, aroused, and the heat rising from his flushed skin, all were good clues, but it was the dark haze of hunger that radiated from him that convinced T.J. that the body and the mind were united on this.

Good thing too. Otherwise he might have exploded from sexual frustration, and it'd been a rough few weeks.

"What's that look mean?" MacGowan dropped quick, openmouthed kisses along T.J.'s neck, down to the dent of his collarbone.

"You're not even looking at—wiseass." T.J. pushed MacGowan's head. Playfully. "Are you using some kind of hocus-pocus, or do you just know me that well?"

"I do now." MacGowan tickled and teased the no-longer-bruised spot at the small of T.J.'s back. "All the things I want to do to you, with you, but..." He rested his chin ruefully on T.J.'s shoulder. "I'm worn-out."

"Magic like this takes a lot out of a guy," T.J. said, not questioning how he knew. He just did. "Anything is enough."

"Mmm." MacGowan tightened his hold. "Then what do you have in mind?"

T.J. thrust his elbow to the side. Luck favored him, and he managed to rattle the shower curtain. "You mentioned a shower."

"I like the way you think." MacGowan thumbed an inch lower. "I always did."

T.J. knew that was the truth. He'd get used to that. Looked forward to it, in fact. "Then do something about it, or I will."

MacGowan's soft laughter burst in puffs of warm air along T.J.'s cheek. "Let's see what you've got."

"It takes concentration and skill and you letting go of me for a second."

"Bah." MacGowan relaxed his hold regardless. "Don't take too long."

"No longer than the count of three." T.J. found the spigot handles and turned them. "One."

"With you so far," MacGowan said under the splash of raining water. Steam from its heat on the cooler tiles rose around them. "Where's two and three?"

"Gotta let go of me all the way for those. Me, I'm taking off these clothes. That's two."

MacGowan was flushed, the curve of his lips positively wicked. Made T.J. proud of him, before he forgot to be as soon as MacGowan had his clothes halfway off. "Keep up."

"Up is not a problem." T.J. discarded his clothes and started to climb in the tub—then stood still. He wanted to look at MacGowan. Every inch of him, from sepia-sable hair to the rosy hue of his cheeks to the flex of his toes, and incidentally, the thick, proud jut of his cock rising toward his stomach. "Up is the least of any of our problems."

"Do we have any problems?"

"Not that I can think of." T.J. slapped MacGowan's hip. His own cock ached, in need of easement. "Get in. You—"

He blinked. MacGowan had disappeared. This might be a Bad Thing.

"Boo," MacGowan said behind him. He pressed a kiss to T.J.'s nape.

T.J. could see that some things were still going to take some getting used to. All other stuff considered, he could roll with it. "Try switching places like that when I'm topping and you're bottoming, and we're going to have problems," he said, stepping over the edge of the tub and inside. The sleekness of the water that'd already soaked MacGowan made him as frictionless as an otter in the ocean, and his skin suede-supple to the touch.

"I'll be good." MacGowan held up two fingers in the Boy Scout sign.

T.J. pulled them down to his mouth and sucked them between his lips. He took his time, laving each finger and sucking one at a time, then together. By the time he'd finished, MacGowan's limbs were satisfyingly limp, dazed with arousal, and the throb of his cock trapped between their bodies had grown sticky. Or maybe that was T.J.

Only one way to find out. T.J. reluctantly let go of his mouthful and pushed his way between them to take MacGowan's cock in hand. It jerked at his touch, sticky precum far hotter than the shower on his fingers. MacGowan hissed and lurched forward, and would have knocked T.J. down if he hadn't righted himself at the last second and taken advantage of T.J.'s *yipe!* to return the favor. T.J. arched, thrust into the tight tunnel of MacGowan's grasp, and strangled out a groan.

"I think I get the idea," MacGowan said hoarsely, drawing his fist up to the crown and then down with a twist of the wrist that made T.J. dig his nails into MacGowan's side.

"Don't take this the wrong way, MacGowan."

"What?"

"Shut up," T.J. said and copied the twist.

They never found a rhythm, but it didn't matter. Slick-thrust, slippery-draw, thick liquid trickling out to smear between them only to be washed away by the water. T.J. fought for control, happily knowing he'd lose that particular battle, but as long as it lasted he'd be there with guns blazing. He sucked marks that wouldn't fade for days

into MacGowan's chest, and let MacGowan manhandle him without a complaint. He found himself backed into the corner of the shower with MacGowan pressing him to the tile. Felt MacGowan's teeth on the back of his neck, knowing exactly what he was doing now and using it shamelessly to his advantage.

"Once again impressed," T.J. rasped.

MacGowan's growl was muffled by his mouthful yet still made T.J. shudder silent and drove him to thrust harder and higher in MacGowan's grasp. Behind him, MacGowan stroked his cock teasingly up the cleft of T.J.'s ass, and in to drag it over his hole. To tease him.

"Gonna do something with that?" T.J. goaded as he twisted to look over his shoulder.

"This, maybe." MacGowan's forefinger, daubed with his own precum, slipped inside T.J. Just one, just to the first knuckle, but the intrusion made T.J. groan, slam his eyes shut, and bear down.

Uh-uh. No more teasing. "Fuck me," he said. "I'll give you the strength if you need it; that's what a familiar does, but if you don't fuck me now —"

MacGowan swore in wisps of breath more ephemeral than the steam. T.J. could feel, from the quake of his legs trying to keep him upright and the involuntary jerk of finger and cock, how much he wanted it.

"I won't let you fall," T.J. said, steady as a rock. "Not now. Not ever. This is who we are. Seal the deal."

The solid weight of MacGowan's head ground against T.J.'s shoulder blade. "You're sure?"

"What? It beats a handshake." T.J. reached behind himself to stroke and scrape what of MacGowan he could touch.

"Nothing beats a handshake."

"I'll be glad to prove you so wrong."

"I think you will." MacGowan rocked forward, once, the bluntness of his cockhead pushed tight to T.J.'s hole. "God. You're too tight; I can't, not without anything to open you up."

"MacGowan?" T.J. asked patiently. "*Wizard*. You can heal a cut by blowing on it. Use your imagination."

"Are all familiars this pushy?"

"They are if they're horny. How should I know?" T.J. wrenched around, neck-breaking angle be damned, and scored a kiss over MacGowan's mouth. "Impress me, magic-boy."

"Hmmm." MacGowan breathed in, breathed out, and stroked deep on the exhale. "My God."

"Told you so." T.J. could feel the slickness of lube between his cheeks, smoothed deep inside him, could feel himself opening for MacGowan and desperate as a whore during a dry spell for it. "No going back. Ever. Now shut up and fuck me."

"Anytime and anywhere," MacGowan said. He pushed with his hips and slid in, tight but easy, stuffed T.J. full and split him apart, spitted on MacGowan's cock. He went on forever, it seemed, bigger than before, somehow...more...in every way.

T.J. scored the tiles with his nails. Not claws. He checked.

MacGowan held still behind him, ever the gentleman, giving him a second. Impatient, T.J. bucked back and took him the deepest ever. "Your turn."

"Pushy," MacGowan scolded, but without heat. His arm snaked around T.J.'s waist and took him in hand once more. "I still want my handshake."

T.J. would have delivered a snappy comeback if he'd had any mind left to spare. MacGowan made sure he didn't. Everyone was a critic.

He let go of time then. Of space. Of everything except MacGowan fucking him, out of control, too hard and too rough and 100 percent perfect. The shower stopped, but the damp heat remained; the only thing that mattered was that T.J. could hear the harshness of MacGowan's breathing all the better in counterpoint to his own. He was breaking apart from the inside out—head on fire, pressure in his balls too much—

Someone was shouting, raising the roof, and he realized it was him. MacGowan bit his neck, dug his nails into T.J.'s stomach, and let 'er rip.

And T.J.'s bare feet sensed the coldness of old concrete beneath them. MacGowan groaned and collapsed over T.J., cock still in him. "Oops," he muttered. "We landed in the laundry room, didn't we?"

"Lost your grip?" T.J. teased. "Must have been good."

"You know it was," MacGowan said. "I think it always will be." He rubbed T.J.'s cum into his cock, which quivered, eager to go again. "They'll probably hear us if we go again."

T.J. considered that. "Oddly enough, it's a risk I'm willing to take. My turn now."

"As long as you're here with me." MacGowan held him too tight, but that was okay. T.J. let it happen. Wanted it.

"No getting rid of me now," he said, slipping free of MacGowan's cock only long enough to turn and face him. "Deal with it."

"Somehow, I don't think that'll be a problem," MacGowan said. "I do forgive you, you know. That was never even a question."

"Somehow, I believe you," T.J. said, going to his knees. He didn't let the whistling, catcalls, and applause from outside stop him, nor the tromp of boots and heavy loads of books heading upstairs give him even a second's worth of pause.

He had better things to do.

Epilogue

T.J.—or “Buddy,” as he’d decided he liked to be called in this shape—stretched and yawned. He rolled over on the comfortable expanse of MacGowan’s lap and cracked sleepy eyes to look up at his wizard. MacGowan petted him, touch sure and gentle, and kept his nose in the book Mr. Jontan had lent him.

This was who he was.

It’d finally sunk in, what Arden was trying to get across. Falling for someone was magic, sure. After that, it was one step at a time, blindfolded in the dark, until you stumbled across the place where it could be love. And if a guy had the balls, or his lover did, he somehow made it to the other side. Reason and logic, should and shouldn’t, none of that had anything to do with making a happy ending.

That was what love was all about. It changed a man, sure, but T.J. saw now that it was only by showing him who he wanted to be and giving him that small—or gigantic—nudge it took to get him there.

“You good?” MacGowan asked, idly skritchng behind Buddy’s ears.

Buddy—T.J.—purred at full volume and kneaded the air. I’m better than good, he thought, drowsy and content. I’m with you.

And evermore would be.

* * * * *

My name’s Thomas Cattrell Jones, T.J. for short. My parents had a rotten sense of humor. I teach animal behavior theory when the local college has the budget and the whim to take me on, and I turn into your basic tabby cat from time to time, more often than that if something rocks my world. Like MacGowan.

What can I say? It’s a thing.

A good thing.

In memory of Loki, forever loved and never forgotten.

 THE END 

Willa Okati

I can most often be found muttering to myself over a keyboard, plugged into my iPod, and breaking between paragraphs to play air drums. I'm teaching myself to play the pennywhistle and mixing up the summer's batches of henna. I have forty-plus separate tattoos and yearn for a full body suit of ink. I tend to walk around in a haze of story ideas, dreaming of tales yet to be told, and I drink an alarming amount of coffee for someone generally perceived to be mellow.