

For Panther shifter Vapor, nothing is more important to him than his feline coalition. A true soldier, he has never let them or his leader, Mitchell, down. So when he's given his latest assignment, he doesn't think twice before accepting it, even if it is to track down Mitchell's youngest brother, Andrew, and bring him in. This isn't going to be a regular rescue mission, however, since Andrew is a wanted fugitive and Vapor will be taking him back to face charges for crimes against the coalition. Still, Andrew is young and inexperienced so Vapor knows the mission will be a snap—or at least he does until Andrew shows him otherwise.

Before he knows it, Vapor has been shot with his own gun, arrested by the human police and his favorite car is blown up. Andrew is behind every humiliating incident, too. Things climb to a whole new level of embarrassing when Andrew seduces Vapor, then leaves him naked and handcuffed to a fence. Vapor vows that he will track down the brat and make him pay, not just for his prior criminal activity, but for each degrading encounter they've experienced. As Vapor gets closer and closer to capturing his prey, he finds himself falling for Andrew. Then when Andrew runs to him, instead of away, Vapor finds he has to make the hardest choice of his life—his coalition or the man he loves.

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RUTHLESS PURSUIT Lost Shifter Series Book Six

By

8†ЕРНАЛІ НЕСНТ

CHAPTER ONE

That little shit would pay for this. Even if Vapor had to breathe his last to make sure it happened.

Balanced on the beam near the ceiling, he had a good view of said little shit, too. He glared down at the thin, small figure walking through the empty warehouse. Even though the piss poor lighting didn't allow for a good view, Vapor had the brat's features painfully memorized. Brown hair, that almost looked blond from the natural highlights running through it. Large, amber eyes that held a false innocence in them. Thick, plump lips that seemed always curled up into a wicked grin. High, arched cheekbones that a added certain elegance to his otherwise youthful appearance.

In other words, Little Shit would have been the perfect fuck buddy, if not for three things. Number one, he happened to be the younger brother of Mitchell, leader of the feline coalition that Vapor belonged to. Number two, Little Shit

was way too young, having just turned twenty-four a week ago. Crap, it would come as a shock to Vapor to find out that the kid had even gone through his first shift yet. Which left reason number three and that one was a biggie. Little Shit happened to be a criminal. Not just any one either, but one who was wanted by the feline coalition and Vapor had orders to bring him in—by any means possible.

Vapor curled his lips as he continued to watch the younger man move silently around the darkened warehouse. Dressed in all black, Little Shit nearly faded into the background. It was only thanks to Vapor's heightened shifter vision that he saw his prey at all.

A Jaguar shifter by birth, the brat moved with a fluid grace that did his heritage proud. Had circumstances been different, Vapor may have even been impressed and that wasn't an easy task. As one of the few Panther shifters in their coalition, he tended to stay to himself and not even talk to others, let alone hand out compliments.

Little Shit approached a crate and a sly smile curved across his face. Despite his sense of duty, Vapor's body reacted to the pure wickedness on the other man's face. It spoke of naughty desires and long nights of sweaty passion—two of Vapor's favorite things. A moan slipped past his

lips as his cock pressed against the fly of his fatigues. At that second, he would have given almost anything to be the one to have put that impish glint in the Jaguar's eyes. If only for a few moments.

Of course, Little Shit had a proper name, Andrew, but Vapor was hard pressed to remember it after all the grief he'd gone through in tracking the jerk down. Before this mission, Vapor had the reputation of being the best tracker, the one who Mitchell always turned to when nobody else could complete the job. All the felines whispered about his skills while at the same time fearing him. It was how he got the nickname Vapor—his ability to stealthily sneak up on somebody. His targets never knew he was there until it was already too late. All of them that is except for one—Andrew.

In the span of three months, Andrew had taken Vapor's tough-ass rep and shredded it like a puppy does a newspaper. That Jaguar...no that kid, had singlehandedly made Vapor the laughing stock of the whole coalition. Vapor was going to make him pay for that, too.

Vapor leaped down from the beam, his feet making the barest of sounds as they hit the ground. Andrew didn't even turn his head, instead he continued to run his palm over the crate. Almost as if he found some lost treasure. It made no sense to Vapor since the warehouse stored mostly medical equipment.

He approached slowly, making sure his steps didn't make even the slightest of noises. Already, more than once, Andrew had displayed that he missed nothing. A point that he proved yet again when he slightly turned and flashed the sweetest of smiles.

"I was wondering when you were going to come down and play with me," he said flippantly, as if he had Panthers tracking his every move all the time.

Vapor paused for a second, unsettled by Andrew's sudden interest in dialog. While they'd had many encounters in the past few months, not once had the Jaguar deigned to actually talk to Vapor.

"Wow, somebody is chatty today. Does this mean that you're finally going to go in with me?" Vapor asked, even though he had a pretty damn good inkling what the answer would be.

Andrew didn't disappoint. Tilting his head to the side, his gave a mischievous wink that made him look younger and way too good looking. "Why in the fuck would I do that?"

"Because Mitchell and the rest of your siblings are worried about you. They want you home, safe with them."

"Funny, and here I thought that maybe I had

pissed Mitchell off when I hacked into his precious coalition's system. Word on the street is that I'm a wanted kitty for that." Andrew turned fully around and leaned against the crate.

His stance spoke of somebody who didn't have a care in the world, but it didn't fool Vapor for a moment. He knew that at first chance, Andrew would be making a break for it. "I'm not going to deny that you're in a bit of trouble for that, but Mitchell was looking for you long before that stunt. Once you get home, he'll help you clear up the mess you made and then you can start out on a fresh foot."

Vapor risked taking a couple of steps closer. Just three more feet and he could launch himself at Andrew. Then this whole pain-in-ass mission would be over and he could put it and the little brat out of his life.

"Are you mad at me for all the things I did to you?" Andrew asked, as if he knew what Vapor was thinking. "I promise it wasn't personal, so you shouldn't think it's because I don't like you. The last thing I want is to upset the big, bad Panther."

Going by the wicked grin that had returned to his face, Andrew really didn't give a flip if Vapor was angry or not. "What I feel doesn't matter," Vapor bit out. Why was it that this kid...this cub, could get under his skin more than any other track? Just one glance at that shit-eating smile, those dancing amber eyes, the way Andrew slightly rolled on the balls of his feet when he knew he'd gotten the upper hand, and Vapor was ready to rip someone apart.

Andrew wrinkled his nose in false sympathy. "It was the car, wasn't it?"

Vapor balled his hands into fists so tight his knuckles popped loudly. "We're not going there. Besides, I wouldn't call an Audi R-8 just a car, you little grenade throwing waste of space."

"It just slipped from my hands. I didn't mean to." Andrew shrugged as he blinked innocently.

"Bullshit. I've seen the way you handle weapons. There is no way anything would *just slip* while you're in control." Vapor allowed himself one more step forward.

Another smile graced Andrew's face, but this one seemed less snarky. "You like the way I work with weapons?"

"You could put most of the soldiers working under your brother to shame," Vapor admitted, even though the compliment burned in his throat.

"Does this mean you forgive me for almost shooting you when we were in Ann Arbor?"

Vapor slowly counted to ten so he didn't allow his anger to get the better of him. Now that he had gotten so close to finally nailing this bastard, he'd be damned if he'd fail yet again. "You nearly took out my kneecap. How do you count that as almost?" Vapor asked as he recalled the pain from that wound.

"I was aiming for your shoulder," Andrew replied simply.

"To top it off, you had the gall to use my own gun against me."

Andrew chuckled. "Well, you were the one who dropped it. You can't expect me to let a nice, shiny Glock like that go unclaimed and end up in a Lost and Found bin."

Vapor refused to be baited and instead went back to the more important subject. "Why are you making this so hard? All Mitchell wants is to bring you back home, where you belong."

"Now who's dishing out the bullshit," Andrew snapped, all the good humor vanishing from his face to be replaced by rage. "If Mitchell wanted me so bad, then he never would have sold me in the first place."

That caused Vapor to pause as his blood turned to ice. "What in the fuck are you talking about? Mitchell would never sell any feline, let alone his own kin. You were lost the night of the attack, along with your brothers—Jacyn, Keegan, Noah and hundreds of other kids. Ever since we found out you were all alive, we've been looking for every one of you."

Andrew let out a bitter sounding laugh. "That's

just some lie Mitchell told everyone so his perfect reputation wouldn't be ruined. Unfortunately for him, that won't work for me because Edward told me everything."

Edward? Who in the fuck is that? Vapor blinked a couple times in confusion. Maybe this new name could be the reason for all the things Andrew did and why the kid had an obvious hatred to Mitchell. "I don't know who this Edward is, Andy, but he's been lying. Mitchell would sooner slit his own throat than give any of you up." Vapor inched another step closer.

"The name is Andrew, not Andy and Edward is everything that Mitchell has refused to be. He's been my father, my protector, my teacher. Without him, I would be dead."

Looks like somebody has themselves a real nasty case of Stockholm Syndrome. Next he'll be wearing a little black beret and robbing banks. "So, you're going to just take this guy's word? You're not even going to give Mitchell a chance to defend himself?"

"Why should I give him a chance when he never gave me one?" Andrew curled his upper lip up in aggression.

It made him look so damn sexy that for a second Vapor was tempted to forget his mission was to capture and bring in to headquarters instead of capture and bring to the nearest bed.

Since he could see this conversation had started

to go downhill, Vapor decided the time had come to act. He launched himself at Andrew, catching the younger man by the chest and bringing him down.

There were a few moments of struggling before Vapor ended up on top, his body stretched out over Andrew, pinning him to the ground. Andrew still fought for several minutes, his smaller frame staining against Vapor in a desperate attempt to get free. All the while, Vapor became painfully aware of nearly ever dip and ridge in Andrew's body. While the Jaguar may be thinner and smaller, that didn't mean he was completely devoid of muscles, and Vapor realized how nice they felt as they flexed and moved under him.

Finally, after what seemed like forever, yet not long enough, Andrew stilled. "Get the fuck off me."

He leveled a glare so icy and murderous at Vapor that a lesser man would have back off. Vapor didn't scare so easily though. "After all you've put me through, you're lucky I'm not pounding you into the ground."

Vapor had intended the comment to mean Andrew was lucky Vapor wasn't beating him, however, there was a sexual way the sentence could have been taken and damn if his cock didn't go the down and dirty route. All of a sudden, he had a very vivid image of how it would be if he

slowly peeled off Andrew's clothes, then licked every inch of his body, before flipping him over and giving him a thorough fucking.

As soon as he felt Andrew's hard erection pressing against his thigh, Vapor realized his mind hadn't been the only one to go in the gutter. Andrew's hands settled on Vapor's biceps as the Jaguar gave a hungry lick to his own lips.

"You have the bluest eyes," Andrew observed in a near whisper. "They go so well with your dark hair."

Not used to taking a compliment, Vapor merely grunted in response. He knew that he should get his cuffs out and secure his prisoner, but Andrew felt damn good under him. Especially when he let out a soft whimper and slightly rocked against Vapor's leg.

"Don't think flattery is going to make me let my guard down. I know how dangerous you are," Vapor warned, even as he resisted the urge to grind on Andrew. The ache in his cock had grown so urgent, Vapor had to hold back a groan of pain.

"It's the truth. You're so fucking hot it's hard to remember sometimes," Andrew gasped, his grip on Vapor's arms growing almost painful.

"Remember what?"

"That you're my enemy." Andrew's lips parted in a moan, almost as if they were begging for a kiss. Focus, idiot. That is the last thing you should be thinking about. You've never failed a mission before, don't let your dick break your perfect record. "I'm not your enemy, Andrew. The sooner you realize that, the better for everyone. When are you going to learn to trust me?"

Andrew stilled, a look of utter bewilderment on his face. "Trust just doesn't come because you ask for it. It has to be earned. Even then it's usually a false word people toss around just to get what they want. Then in the end they always end up doing the same thing, stabbing you in the back."

For some reason, that sentiment coming from Andrew brought a pang of sadness to Vapor. What could the kid have possibly seen in life to make him so bitter? Sure, Vapor felt the same way. Hell, he'd probably uttered that identical sentence, but Andrew was way too young to be feeling the same reluctance to open up. Then again, Vapor had learned over the past few months that there were plenty of things that someone Andrew's age shouldn't be doing or feeling. "How is it that someone as young as you is so jaded?" Vapor asked.

"Maybe it's because my own family didn't even fucking want me."

"If that's the case, then answer me this. If Mitchell never wanted you, then why is he going through so much trouble to track you down?"

"Because I broke into his stupid system," Andrew fired back.

"Wrong. He had already sent soldiers out searching for you before that. Or did you forget about the one you locked up in a vault?"

A chuckle burst past Andrew's mouth. "Oh, yeah. I forgot about him. Did you guys ever get him out?"

Vapor ignored the question, getting back on topic. "So, now are you willing to admit that Mitchell has been looking before you became a wanted felon?"

Andrew scowled. "Felon is such a harsh word." "Answer the question," Vapor growled as he leaned in so their faces were only inches apart.

"Why should I do that when you're not going to be awake to hear the answer?" Andrew gave that wicked smile, the one Vapor had both began to dread and lust over at the same time.

Vapor tried to move away, but it was already too late. A pinpoint of pain in his right bicep was his only warning before everything started to get blurry. He opened his mouth to yell, but all that came out was a guttural sound.

"I'm so sorry I had to do this. I wish there was another way, but I'm not going in with you," Andrew said, his voice sounding a million miles away.

He then put a hand in the center of Vapor's

chest and rolled him over onto his back. Vapor tried to fight, but his arms had grown too heavy to move. The edges of his vision started to grow dark and he knew he had seconds before he passed out.

Andrew flipped his hand so the palm faced Vapor, revealing a small needle attached to the backside of a ring. "It's a little invention of a friend of mine. It has a sedative that's specifically made for our kind. Don't worry though, you should only be out of it for a few hours."

Vapor let out a gurgle sound of distress. *A few hours*.

Andrew made a sympathetic face. "Five-six hours tops."

A loud yelping sound filled the air, making Andrew look up, worry creasing his brow. "Oh, no. Looks like we tripped the alarm. I better get going before the *PoPo* get here." With those parting words, he turned and walked away.

Vapor mentally yelled out a vile curse word, before darkness overtook him.

CHAPTER TWO

Andrew ran down the deserted street as fast as his already tired feet could carry him. His lungs burned, the pack on his back felt heavy and a nasty stitch had developed in his side, but he didn't dare stop to catch his breath since he already was a half hour past curfew.

Shit. Fuck. Damn. He just had to waste all that time chatting it up with Vapor. He should have known better. Or at the least shown some stronger self-control. But noooo, all it took was one glance at those sharp blue eyes, that dark buzz cut, the Panther's hard body and dark uniform, then Andrew had lost all his sense.

He turned the corner, his tennis shoes making a squelching noise on the wet pavement. When he saw the porch light blazing next to the front door of the house, his stomach dropped. Shit, his tardiness had been noticed. A small part of him had hoped with everything that had been going on, a missing Andrew had been at the bottom of

the give-a-damn list. He raced up the porch and by the time his feet had hit the final step, the front door had already swung open to reveal his best friend, Owen.

"It's about damn time you got here. Edward is ready to shit a brick," Owen said, by way of greeting. A normally reserved Tiger shifter with short, blond hair and blue eyes, it took a lot to get Owen as upset as he looked to be at the moment. Damn, Edward really must be pissed.

"I ran into some trouble," Andrew gasped as he stumbled through the door. Once inside, he bent over and put his hands on his knees as he fought to get his breath back.

"Was it that tracker again?" Owen asked as he worked the numerous locks on the door.

Their mentor, Edward, had a bit of a paranoid streak and the first thing he did whenever they moved to a new location was install heavy deadlocks and an alarm system. Owen activated that, too, before turning to give Andrew his full attention.

"Well, was it him? Or was it humans?" Owen demanded.

"It was the tracker." While Andrew had learned Vapor's name a long time ago, for some reason, he seemed reluctant to share it with the others. After living nearly his entire life with Edward, Owen and Shane, it felt nice to finally have something that he could keep as his own. Even if it were only a small kernel of information.

"Are you absolutely positive it was the same one again?" Owen cocked a pierced brow. Not all of his looks were boy-next-door. He had various piercings and often dyed his hair outrageous colors when Edward allowed it. This particular night he had red on the tips.

"Yeah, this guy won't give up like all the others did." Andrew started taking off the various weapons and tools strapped to his body. By the time he'd finished, he had a pretty impressive pile going.

Owen came over to do an inventory and put them all away. "How did you get away this time?" Owen asked as he started to hang things on the many hooks lining the back wall of the front room. If they had been human, they may have called it a living room, instead they used it as a base for their operations.

"I used this." Andrew grinned as he held his palm up so Owen could see the needle.

"Sweet!" Owen exclaimed, his usually reserved attitude giving away to almost boyish happiness.

Andrew took off the ring and slid it across the table to Owen.

"I think we can count this as another success for you," he praised, knowing Owen secretly loved compliments. "You should have seen his face when he realized what I'd done. Then for a final fuck you, I lied and told him he'd be out for hours."

"That's mean, even for you. Were you at least able to complete your mission?" Owen demanded as he picked up the ring and studied it.

"Was there any doubt?" Andrew snorted as he shrugged off his backpack. Opening it, he took out the various pieces of medical equipment that Owen had requested.

Owen smiled as he went through the items. "You managed to get everything?"

"Yeah." Andrew swallowed hard. "Will it help any?"

"I don't know," Owen admitted as he worried his bottom lip with his teeth. "I'm just winging it at this point. I'm not a doctor and that's what Edward needs."

"You know he won't agree to that. He can't go to a human hospital and he wants nothing to do with other shifters." Andrew cast a worried glance at the closed bedroom door as sorrow threatened to overwhelm him.

Knowing he couldn't put it off any longer, Andrew walked down the hall and pushed open the door. His heart clenched as he gazed at Edward. The man who had been his mentor, his father, his everything, now laid in a bed...a shadow of his former self. While he'd once had long, golden-blond hair and a strong body, now he weighed less than a hundred pounds and was nearly bald. Tan vibrant skin had turned to a paper-like gray pallor and his breaths came out in loud rattles.

As he entered the room, Andrew tried hard not to gag on the ripe smell of sickness as he approached the bed. As he stepped closer, Edward cracked his lids to reveal his pale blue eyes.

"You're late," he accused in a raspy voice.

Even given Edward's infirmed condition, a lifetime's worth of harsh discipline at the man's hand still made a shiver of dread go down Andrew's spine. He got down on his knees by the bed and lowered his head in a submissive position. "Sorry, Edward. I ran into tracker and got held up for a while." He tensed in anticipation of the anger he knew would be coming his way.

"Another one of Mitchell's felines?" The contempt in Edward's voice rang clear.

"Yes."

"This one was no doubt like the others, low bred and worthless."

An image of Vapor popped into Andrew's head. With his classic military good looks and obvious battle skills, Vapor was anything but worthless. Andrew didn't dare voice that opinion though, so instead he nodded.

"Did you at least manage to complete your

mission?"

"Yes, I already gave the equipment to Owen." Andrew nearly flinched when he felt a hand on his head. Instead of the blow he expected, he got a gentle pat. At first that confused him since Edward had never been the affectionate type. Then Andrew decided not to over think it and allowed himself to relax into the caress. "I'm sorry I was late," Andrew murmured.

"You should be. When you do that it makes me worry about you," Edward replied, his voice much softer and soothing than before.

For one, brief irrational moment, a bitter part of Andrew wondered if his guardian would miss him or just the unique skills he had to offer and the willingness to take on any mission. Their only income came from contracts people paid for Andrew or Shane to pull off special jobs. Since all of said jobs usually involved such things as breaking and entering or theft, it wasn't like Edward could easily replace him. It's not as if the guy could put an ad out in the classifieds that read, Needed, one feline shifter. Must be highly trained in burglary, lock picking, firearms and counterfeiting. Please include references.

Just as quickly, Andrew tamped down those rebellious thoughts. After everything Edward had done for him and the others, Andrew knew the last thing he should be was ungrateful. "I know you worry about me and I should have remembered your feelings," Andrew continued to grovel. While he did fear that Edward would order him beaten or worse, Andrew more dreaded the despair of knowing he'd let the older man down.

"Just because Mitchell claims to be your brother doesn't mean he'll go soft on you," Edward warned as he continued to stroke Andrew's hair.

"I know."

Andrew wondered why that truth still hurt, even after so many years.

"He's the one who sold you and your brothers. Then he went and fetched the others back, but still left you out in the world. That just proves he never wanted you and never will. The only reason he's sending out trackers for you now is because you wounded his pride by breaking through his security. You exposed his weakness for the world to see and he won't forgive that."

"I know," Andrew readily replied as he curled his fingers into the stiff, nappy carpet. Even though he should have been long used to it, that little nibble of truth still hurt, too.

"He'll put you in chains and throw you in his prison, then leave you there to rot."

Okay, that last line had been a little overdramatic, even for Edward. Come on, all that was missing was some ominous music and then a

close up of Andrew's worried reaction. He knew bringing in a TV so Edward could watch soaps all day had been a huge mistake. Lowering his head even more, so Edward wouldn't see him rolling his eyes, Andrew just did the nod thing again, since he knew better than to call the man out on it.

While he did love and respect Edward, at times like this, Andrew felt hard pressed to hold back some of the questions that had been festering in the back of his head. Like if Mitchell only wanted Andrew to punish him, then why had the feline brother start sending out trackers *before* the hacking incident? Or if they were really the good guys in all this, then why had Edward always insisted that they never talk to any shifters? Ever since they'd been old enough to understand, Edward had beat it into their skulls that contact with any other shifters was strictly forbidden. "What's my punishment going to be?" Andrew gritted out, eager to get it over with.

"I think a few hours on the kneeling post will do."

"Thank you," Andrew said, giving the standard required response. The same one they had been using since he was a kid.

He got to his feet and left Edward, immediately going to the corner of the main room. There sat a small platform that had three wood slats across it. A couple of inches wide, they had a sharp edge

running across the top. Andrew knelt, his body weight immediately causing the wood to dig into his knees and lower legs.

While the pain felt mild at first, as time passed, it became excruciating. Andrew still accepted the punishment with a sense of relief since he knew what the alternative could have been. While he knew he could take a beating, he also realized how it tore both Shane and Owen up inside when they had to be the ones delivering it.

He'd just settled into position when Shane quietly walked over and knelt down by his side. The youngest of their group, with sandy hair and large brown eyes, Shane had an almost innocent, shy-like appearance about him. That served only as a shield, however, as Andrew knew Shane could handle his own in any fight. Truth be told, Andrew would be hard pressed to find a meaner son-of-a-bitch than Shane. On more than one occasion, Andrew had seen the Leopard shifter coldly take down an opponent. Where he and Owen always hesitated to make a kill, Shane never flinched. As far as Andrew could tell, he didn't ever look back with regret either.

Yet, if Edward had given the order for a beating, it would have hit Shane the hardest. While he hated the rest of the world, Andrew knew the Leopard would give up his life for his rag-tag family members.

"Owen tells me it was the same tracker that's been on your ass for the past few months," Shane whispered.

"Yeah." Andrew winced as he shifted slightly on the boards.

"Do you want me to kill him?" Shane's question came out as casually as if he were asking if Andrew needed him to pick up the dry cleaning or something.

"No," Andrew said sharply.

They both winced before shooting furtive glances at the closed bedroom door. If Edward found them talking during the punishment, there would be hell to pay. When nothing happened, they both let out sighs of relief.

"Why can't I kill him? It seems like the best way to end your problem," Shane pressed.

Andrew blinked at him in astonishment. Yet, Shane was the one who had old ladies pinching his cheeks and patting his head. It just went to show that cute, little Bambie eyes sometimes hid the worst kind of mean. "You can't just go around offing people when they piss you off." Even as Andrew explained that point, he knew it would fly over Shane's head.

"Why?"

Andrew sighed. How exactly did one go about explaining right and wrong to a sociopath? "You just can't. It's wrong."

Now it was Shane who blinked in confusion. "You like the tracker, don't you?"

"No," Andrew quickly denied, his heart hammering in his chest.

A rare smile curled Shane's lips. "Yes, you do. You're probably hard right now, just thinking about him."

"Shut up."

Shane moved in closer, his hand going to Andrew's knee. "Tell me all about him. Is he hot? Does he have a great body? How huge is his cock?"

Andrew determinedly moved Shane's hand away. "Since I haven't seen his cock, how would I know? And, yes, he's hot."

"I knew it." Shane let out a low chuckle that sounded both wicked and demented at the same time.

"It doesn't matter though, because he's still the enemy."

Andrew turned his face back to the wall, ending the conversation. Try as he may though, he couldn't keep his mind off Vapor. Enemy or not, Andrew knew that he'd grown to be more than a little attracted to the feline and he knew that could lead to his own undoing.

He snorted softly to himself. Now who was being overly dramatic? At this rate, he may as well give it up and start watching those soaps, too.

CHAPTER THREE

Vapor wanted to kill somebody. No! More specifically, he wanted to kill Andrew. He'd make sure to do it nice and slow, too, all the while yelling at the little brat.

When Vapor walked out of the small, human police station that had served as his own personal B&B for the past twenty-four, his mood soured even more. Leaning against a dark red, sports car, Brent waited for him and he had the utter gall to smirk at Vapor.

Brent was another one of Mitchell's many brothers. While they were both the same age, Brent served under his brother. Albeit as one of the highest-ranking generals who answered only to Mitchell.

Despite the title and power, Brent couldn't be further away from military regulation. Well, okay, he did wear the uniform well and he always kept his brown hair regulation length, but that was as far as it went.

"Why in the hell did Mitchell send you to bail me out?" Vapor said by way of greeting. He and Brent had never been chummy so no reason to start.

"He didn't, I volunteered," Brent replied cheerfully as he pushed away from the car, then started to dig in his front pocket for the keys.

At least Vapor hoped it was the keys because he didn't feel like getting arrested again because Brent decided to get frisky with himself in the parking lot.

"No offense, but the last one I want to be around is someone who almost looks exactly like him." Vapor curled his lip as he delivered the insult.

Brent raised a brow. "Does he? I mean, we noticed the similarity the one time he contacted us, but we weren't for sure since the quality of the video feed wasn't that good."

"His hair is lighter, but other than that, you guys could be twinsies," Vapor drawled sarcastically as he went over to the passenger side and waited for Brent to disengage the lock.

Brent paused, a troubled look crossing his face. "Does he really hate us?"

Vapor thought about lying because for some insane reason, he didn't want to hurt Brent's feelings. In the end, he knew he had to go with the truth so they knew what they would be dealing

with.

"Yeah, he thinks Mitchell willingly gave him up."

Brent's mouth parted in surprise. "Why would he believe that?"

"I don't know. All he mentioned was that somebody named Edward told him that Mitchell sold him."

"Shit," Brent breathed, as he leaned against the car, this time in a defeated manner.

While Vapor felt for the guy, he didn't understand his reaction given Brent really didn't know Andrew. Family was something that Vapor had never experienced, so he never could wrap his mind around the whole unconditional love thing. His own parents had died several years ago, leaving him in the care of his cold, sometimes sadistic, uncle. As a result, Vapor had learned to go through life on his own a long time ago. He'd only come to live with the coalition recently, instead making his way as a human. He'd even gone so far as to serve a couple of stints in their military. "I do know one thing. Somebody trained the shit out of Andrew. I've seen some moves out of the kid that were new. Even to me."

Brent gave a weak smile. "So you mean my baby brother managed to shock the infamous Vapor?"

"Just unlock the door so we can get out of

here," Vapor commanded, trying to change subjects.

"You're supposed to be one of the best trackers we have and yet some little snot-nosed kid is putting you to shame. How did he get away from you this time?"

"He tranqed me," Vapor admitted between gritted teeth.

That made Brent pause, his brow raised in surprise. "How is that possible?"

"He said it was something specially made up for our kind. Of course, he also said it lasted for five hours and that was a lie. I was only out a few minutes, but it was long enough for the police to nab me."

Vapor repressed an angry growl as he recalled coming to, only to find himself surrounded by the *PoPo*, all of whom had their guns drawn.

"Don't worry about them. Mitchell called in some favors from his military contacts and all evidence of your arrest have been erased," Brent assured him, finally unlocking the door.

The main source of income for the coalition came from contracts they had with the human military. While the general population still didn't know of the existence of shifters, the government did. They liked to use their enhanced abilities to their advantage, too. Shifters could run faster, move quieter and were ten times stronger than

any human soldier.

Vapor got in and settled himself in the leather seat, dreading the long drive ahead. Even on his best days, Brent's incessant chatter grated on his nerves. So when Brent sat behind the wheel for several long minutes without turning on the car, let alone talking, Vapor started to worry. "You okay?" he finally asked.

Brent nodded, but his gaze remained troubled. Finally, he blurted, "What if you can't bring him in?"

"Don't worry. I will," Vapor replied without an ounce of doubt. He'd never failed a mission before and he'd be damned if he let some cute, little twinkie ruin his perfect record.

"Even if you do, what's to stop him from leaving again?"

"Well, I would think one of our jail cells could keep even him in." Vapor reached over, took the keys from Brent's fingers, then turned on the car.

"I guess," Brent replied, weakly. "I just keep hoping it won't come to that. That Andrew had a good reason for what he did."

"A good reason for nearly destroying our operating system?" Vapor asked incredulously.

Brent shrugged. "You never know. Maybe it was because he was under duress or something. For all we know, this Edward could be holding something over his head."

Vapor sighed as he silently cursed Andrew for not giving a damn about who he hurt. "I don't think so, Brent. Andrew seemed pretty adamant in his hatred for Mitchell."

"But why? We never did anything to him? In fact, we've done everything we could to find him."

"I don't know for sure, but I think this Edward has been filling his head with lies."

"Why would he do that?" Brent slowly shook his head.

Vapor could think of a whole bunch, many of them not so nice, then he thought once more about how highly trained Andrew was. "For the same reason the human government hires us."

Brent blinked a few times, as if he were digesting that suggestion. "You mean, he's using Andrew's skills as a shifter to do things for him?"

"Yeah, and I'm willing to bet that none of them are legal either."

"What exactly is that supposed to mean?" Brent narrowed his eyes dangerously.

"He knows how to get inside secure buildings, how to handle weapons and burglary tools."

A moment of silence settled over them as Brent pulled out, then got on the main road. All the while, Vapor could tell the gears were turning in the guy's head.

"Do you think Andrew is the only one Edward

has?" Brent finally asked.

Vapor hadn't stopped to consider that, but he realized he should have brought that question up to himself much earlier. Now that Brent mentioned it, there had been the scent of other males lingering on Andrew's clothing. He thought back to something Andrew had said, *It's a little invention of a friend of mine*. At the time, Vapor had just assumed he'd been talking about a connection in the black market or something, but what if that someone was much closer? "How many shifters do we still have missing?"

Just over twenty years ago, hundreds of children had gone missing during a mass attack by Raven shifters. Up until recently, everyone had assumed all the kids were dead. Then they'd found out that most of them were alive and well, but scattered throughout human society. Since then, Mitchell and the felines had been scrambling to find all the survivors.

"We've found about seventy-five percent of them, but we still have a ways to go," Brent admitted.

"So this Edward could have managed to build himself a nice little gang and brainwashed them to work for him."

"You mean like Fagin from Oliver Twist?"

"Exactly, and the younger he got the kids, the better. That way he could mold them exactly the way he wants, all the while filling their impressionable minds full of lies."

Brent let out a long breath as he nervously tapped the steering wheel. "How many shifters do you think he has?"

"I could detect the faint scents of at least two when I was on top of him."

"On top of him?" Bent echoed sharply.

"We tussled a bit, but not in the way you think."

"How about Edward? Do you think he's a shifter?"

Vapor shook his head. "I don't think so. For one thing, why would he have to coerce Andrew and the others to do his dirty work if he was? It would be easier for him to do the jobs himself. Plus, I think that medical equipment Andrew swiped was for Edward."

"So, that doesn't mean anything. We have a fully stocked infirmary at headquarters."

"Yeah, but I smelled something else on Andrew," Vapor said.

"What was that?"

"Sickness and not any shifter illness either, this was a human disease."

"Which one?"

"Cancer. My guess is that Edward is dying and when he does, Andrew and the others will be alone and more vulnerable than ever." "Which means we need to find them and soon," Brent finished, grimly.

* * * *

Later that evening, Andrew lay on his bed and thought back to his narrow escape from Vapor.

That had been close—too close. Andrew finally had to admit that maybe Vapor would be his undoing. The dark-haired menace had proven to be more skilled and stubborn than all the other trackers Mitchell had sent out.

On habit, Andrew reached out and grabbed the makeshift file he'd secretly compiled on the shifter. Opening the battered and dog-eared folder, he stared at the scant information he'd been able to compile on the man.

A Panther shifter, he'd joined the coalition a few years ago. Before that, he'd served in the human military. Surprisingly enough, Owen had been able to hack into that system much easier than the coalition's. Of course Andrew hadn't told Owen it had been so he could find out more about his sexy, dark-haired stalker. If Owen had known he might have felt duty bound to tell Edward, so it had been a huge risk on Andrew's part. It had been worth it though, because he now knew information about Vapor's military years.

A Navy SEAL, he'd served for eight years

before leaving. During that time, he'd gone out on several missions and had been highly regarded by his superiors. After that bit of info, Andrew hadn't bothered to dig deeper because he had all he needed to know. Vapor was highly trained and good at what he did. Which meant that Andrew was in deep doo-doo.

He started to throw the file aside in disgust, only to pull up short when he spotted a photo of Vapor. It really wasn't much, just a blown up shot from his driver's license, but Andrew had spent many hours gazing at it. Taken just after Vapor had left the military, it showed the man that Andrew had both grown to hate and desire.

A moan slipped past his lips as he lovingly caressed the photo. His cock swelled to life as he recalled the hard press of Vapor's body against him earlier in the warehouse. Andrew regretted he hadn't had the time to slowly caress each inch of Vapor until he every one of the man's hard muscles committed to memory.

He pulled the collar of his shirt up and breathed in deep, savoring the lingering scent of Vapor. Dense and tropical, it reminded Andrew of the one time he'd gone to the Detroit Zoo and he'd visited the butterfly and birdhouse.

A surge of anger went through him and he sat up with a growl. What in the hell was getting into him? Vapor was a tracker for fuck's sake, not some cute guy at the coffee shop. Andrew should be thinking of ways to end the Panther's life, not of how he could get in his pants.

He rubbed his legs, wincing in pain as his fingers encountered the numerous bruises. They were because of Vapor and his interference. So how come Andrew couldn't work up any real resentment for the man?

No, instead he felt the same worry and doubt that had been plaguing him all the day and the previous night. He couldn't shake the guilt over leaving Vapor unconscious and at the mercy of humans. While he'd done it without a second thought to plenty of other shifters before, with Vapor, it had been different.

He set down the picture, then picked up his cell phone. Right after he'd knocked Vapor out, Andrew had taken a few precious seconds he hadn't had to borrow Vapor's phone long enough to snatch the Panther's number. Andrew had programmed the digits into his own cell so it would be easy to call and check to see if Vapor had made it out okay.

Before he could talk himself out of it, Andrew pressed the buttons that would connect him to Vapor. All the while, he listened carefully for someone approaching his room, fearful of being discovered.

It rang only a couple of times before Vapor's

hard voice come over the line. "Hello."

When Andrew just swallowed instead of responding, Vapor repeated the greeting, this time in a harsher tone.

"So, you must have managed to get sprung from jail," Andrew finally said.

"You have a lot of nerve calling me. How in the hell did you get my number?"

"The Yellow Pages. I just looked under *Pain in the ass felines who love to make Andrew's life hell.*" Andrew settled against the headboard, wincing as pain shot up his legs.

"That's funny, I was just going to use The Pages to find you. Only I had planned on looking under, Little Shit who Vapor would love to plant his boot on."

"I so adore the pet name you gave me. It lets me know how much you love me." Andrew plucked nervously at the thick, blue blanket covering his bed. Between openly talking to Vapor and the fear of being discovered, his nerves were strung tight.

"I feel many things for you, kid, but none of them are love."

"What exactly are they?" Andrew couldn't resist asking, even as he suspected he wouldn't like the answer.

"Annoyance. Dislike. Anger. Homicidal."

"Ouch," Andrew breathed. Okay, maybe he hadn't expected warm and fuzzies from Vapor. After all, he had blown the guy's car up and shot him, but Andrew had assumed that maybe the flicker of attraction had gone both ways.

Then he looked back on the file and everything he'd learned about Vapor came flooding back. In his entire adult life, Vapor had never grown close to anyone. At the risk of being melodramatic, yet again, the Panther had lived in the shadows in both his personal and professional life.

"What? Did you think this would be like your other formerly lost brothers, Keegan and Jacyn? That I would fall into the same trap as Carson and Logan and fall for my target? That you and I are going to end up happily ever after or something?"

"No, because unlike Keegan and Jacyn, I want nothing to do with you or the fucking coalition," Andrew lashed out, the sting from Vapor's words making him rash.

"Then why are you calling me?"

Andrew closed his eyes as Vapor's question washed over him. The tone when he'd asked it had been so clipped...so cold. Just like the man who'd spoke it.

What did you expect, dumbass. That after all the times you made him look bad, he'd be your next BFF?

"I just wanted to see if the new tranquilizer we cooked up was lethal or not. Since you're talking to me now, I guess it's safe to say it didn't kill you though, so I have the answer to that puzzle," Andrew snapped, striving to make his voice

emotionless. It proved hard though. He knew he was letting his emotions get the best of him. Not good. If his training had taught him one thing, it was to never, ever let his feelings run the show. That very thing could lead to him finding himself in chains.

"Your brothers are worried about you. So is your sister, Cassie," Vapor said in that same clinical voice.

Andrew briefly wondered if he'd have to shoot the guy again to get any sort of real emotion. "I don't have any family." Andrew used one finger to flick open the file again so he could gaze at the photo of Vapor. "You of all felines should understand that since you have no living relatives."

"How do you know that?"

He smiled as he heard anger in the Panther's voice. Finally, some kind of reaction. "I've been a very good little boy and did my homework. You'd be amazed at the resources we have."

"That's the second time you've used that word."

Andrew blinked as he tried to figure out what Vapor referred to. "Huh?"

"We. As in there is more than one in your gang."

A bolder size pit dropped into Andrew's gut as he realized that he could have put the others in jeopardy. "Sorry to burst your bubble, but there is no gang. Like I said before, I have no family. It's just me."

"Then who's Edward? And who made the weapon you used to put me out?" Vapor challenged.

Fuckity, fuck, fuck! Andrew suddenly realized that for the first time since he'd started running from Vapor, the Panther had managed to get the upper hand. "Edward died a long time ago and I bought the weapon on the black market."

Both lies. Edward may be circling the drain, but he hadn't taken that final plunge yet and Andrew had never dealt with any market, period. Shane always worked with the illegal one and Owen did all the grocery shopping.

"You know what I think?" Vapor asked, sounding irritatingly chiding.

"No, and I don't give a damn either." Andrew gripped the phone tight, a layer of sweat building up on the palm of his hand.

"I don't believe for one fucking second that some twinkie, who doesn't know his head from his dick, could pull of all those jobs alone. You had to have to help."

"You don't know anything," Andrew protested, his breaths coming out in short gasps because it felt as if someone had put an iron ring around his chest.

"I do know one thing. You're scared as shit right now and that's going to make you fuck up enough for me to finally bring you in."

Instead of replying to that threat, Andrew snapped the phone closed, then tossed it across the room. The file soon followed it, papers scattering as it hit the wall. He started to tremble from head to boot as he realized Vapor had been right. It would only be a matter of time before he fucked up and when he did, he'd find himself in the coalition prison.

CHAPTER FOUR

Vapor didn't like this...not one damn bit.

He sat in the driver's seat of his new car as he watched Andrew move around the darkened parking lot of some rundown seedy bar in the worst part of Pontiac. As usual, the small Jaguar wore all black and appeared to have more hardware strapped to his body than a cable guy.

When Andrew finally came to a halt by a dark green Corvette, Vapor let out a low hiss of displeasure. He'd recognize that ride anywhere. It belonged to a certain snake shifter, named Cora, who would not be pleased if she caught somebody touching her wheels. Either Andrew was ignorant to that fact or he was just plain cocky. Vapor would be willing to bet on it being the later.

Andrew got on his back and wiggled under to the car. Even from his crappy view, Vapor's cock still responded to the lithe way Andrew's body moved. Vapor squinted, thanking all that was holy that he had his enhanced feline vision so he could see relatively well in the dark without having to resort to goggles.

A smile spread out over his face. That little booger was planting a tracking device on Cora's car. Naughty. Naughty. Vapor slid out of his own car, taking care not to slam the door behind him. Before he'd gone out, he disabled his dome light, so as to not give himself away.

By the time he reached Cora's *precious*, Andrew had started to scoot his way out. If he was surprised to see Vapor, he didn't show it. Instead, he slowly stood to his feet as he brushed his hands over his clothes.

"If Cora finds you messing with her car, she will swallow you whole and slowly digest your body for a week," Vapor announced by way of greeting.

Andrew wrinkled his nose. "That's gruesome."

"Are you going to tell me what in the hell you're doing?" Vapor tried for a relaxed pose, all the while keeping a close eye on Andrew's hands. He noted with great relief the Jaguar's special ring didn't grace any of his fingers.

"Someone hired me to plant that on her car." Andrew shrugged, acting as if it were nothing to potentially piss off a Coral Snake shifter. He also didn't appear too worried that he had Vapor standing just inches from him.

"Why in the hell would you take a job that

dangerous? Even somebody as dumb as you should know that you don't fuck around with snakes."

Andrew let loose with that ah-shucks grin. "Because the contact is paying me a shit load of money."

"Trust me, it's not worth it. Nobody is crazy enough to even want to ally with snakes, let alone go against them like you are. Mitchell won't even take their calls."

"Are we back to him again?" Andrew switched his tone to a higher-pitched, Jane Brady tone. "It's always, Mitchell, Mitchell, Mitchell."

Vapor almost laughed. Then a sly speculative look passed over Andrew's gaze and the mirth caught in Vapor's throat.

"I can think of so many other things I'd rather do than talk about him," Andrew continued huskily.

At first Vapor suspected that Andrew was just playing another one of his games, but then he smelled it. The unmistakable scent of desire that practically poured from the Jaguar. Giving a low purr, Andrew slowly ran a hand down his own chest until his hand rested on his cock.

"You can't be serious?" Vapor demanded, even as his own dick swelled in happy anticipation.

"Very." Andrew rubbed his erection, a groan passing through his slightly parted lips. "Do you

want to know what I did all last night?"

No, Vapor did not want to know because he had a feeling whatever it was would make him stupid with desire. Still he asked, "What?"

"I jacked off and the entire time I did it, I stared at your picture." Andrew gave a breathy laugh. "How pathetic is that? My idea of porn is something snapped by the DMV."

"How about this? You come in with me and we can have some fun back at headquarters?" Vapor immediately regretted his suggestion when Andrew's gaze cleared as he stopped satisfying himself.

Passion faded, to be replaced by cold, hard rage. "You just had to bring that tired subject back up, didn't you? If it's not Mitchell, then it's about me surrendering. When are you going to learn that I'm not some normal target? I'm not going to roll over and play along just because big, bad Vapor is after me," Andrew nearly yelled.

The small flame of desire inside Vapor flared to full life. Nobody had ever dared stand up to him like Andrew just did. Nor, the way he'd been doing for the past few months. Vapor suddenly realized how dull and predictable his life had been until a stubborn as shit Jaguar had blown in and changed everything. Now it was Vapor who rubbed himself. Licking his lips, he made sure all the arousal coursing through his body carried over

to his expression. "I'll tell you what. I'll let you make a run for it." He tilted his head to the nearby field.

* * * *

Andrew audibly gulped as he flicked a quick glance in the direction Vapor indicated. "Do you mean you actually want me to—"

"Run. I'll give you a ten second head start," Vapor cut in.

The tension in the air cracked with arousal. Andrew sucked in a breath as he caught the primal desire stamped in Vapor's usually cool eyes. Then his gaze traveled down the man's body. He took in every ridge of hard muscle, barely concealed by the black fatigues.

Did he want this? To have Vapor stalk him like he was some sort of prey to be devoured? To be taken and pinned down like some animal? To submit totally as Vapor fucked him senseless?

The answer to those questions could be summed up in two words—hell yeah.

"You're wasting time," Vapor practically growled as he licked his lips again.

A thrill shot up Andrew's body as the animal side of him acknowledged the challenge. Not hesitating for one more breath, he turned and bolted for the field, taking cover in the trees.

His heart pounded with excitement as he jumped over roots and dodged between trunks. The full moon shone down on him, giving him a bit more light. Not that he needed it. For the first time in what seemed like forever, he let the Jaguar inside in guide him. Every sense grew stronger. He could smell the wildlife around him, the pungent smell of dirt mixing in with the dense scent of foliage. He could hear the scuttles as rabbits and mice darted away from him, perhaps sensing the predator running past. He could even make out each individual blade of grass as his feet stomped them down.

In his entire life, he'd only been allowed to shift to his Jaguar form once and it had been kind of like this. However, this time Andrew retained his human body, so he didn't have to deal with the pain he'd come to associate with shifting. Never before had he felt more alive or free. A laugh of pure happiness burst past his lips, even though he knew the noise would alert Vapor to his position.

A snarl echoed through the night air, letting Andrew know the chase had begun. It should have scared the shit out of him to know that a man who could not only shift into a Panther, but had been trained in dozens of ways to kill, was after him. Instead it gave him a heady thrill that made him almost high.

A large stump blocked his path, so Andrew

jumped over it. Just as he reached midair, Vapor appeared out of nowhere. He leaped up, wrapped his arms around Andrew's waist and brought him down. They landed with a hard thump, Andrew ending up on the bottom. The air left his lungs in a loud whoosh.

Vapor's strong body covered him and Andrew had never felt more vulnerable and turned on. The hard length of Vapor's cock pressed against Andrew's belly as the Panther leaned in so close his breath fanned against Andrew's cheek.

"Gotcha," Vapor said, his tone just cocky enough to irritate Andrew if the situation had been different.

"Don't think so," Andrew replied, just as confidently before he head butted Vapor.

Vapor didn't cry out in pain, but did hiss and loosen his hold.

Andrew wiggled free, scrambled to his feet and took off running again. A low chuckle sounded behind him before Vapor gave chase.

"So you want to play rough?" Vapor goaded, his voice way too close.

Andrew zigged to the left, abruptly changing direction. "You know you like it that way." He darted into a small clearing, nearly running into a huge chain link fence. A curse tore from his lips as he curled his fingers around the steel and gave the obstacle a vicious shake. He debated climbing it,

but the sound of Vapor crashing through the clearing behind him let Andrew know he wouldn't make it halfway up before being caught. Spinning around, Andrew pressed his back to the fence so he could face his adversary.

Vapor stood, nearly motionless, a few feet away. His hands were balled into fists at his sides and he heaved with each breath. Sweat made his dark hair plaster to his forehead and the look in his blue eyes grew so predatory that Andrew shivered in both fear and anticipation.

"So, you got me. Now what are you going to do?" Andrew asked, pleased that his voice didn't tremble.

Instead of answering outright, Vapor started to unhurriedly peel away his own clothing as he slowly approached. First off was his top, revealing a tan, muscular chest, slick with perspiration. Next was his gun holster, the move shocked Andrew because it showed a degree of trust on Vapor's part. Andrew quickly shucked his weapons, too, just to show he meant no harm either. His reward came quick by way of Vapor taking off his boots and pants so he soon stood fully nude in front of Andrew.

"Fuck," Andrew groaned as he allowed his gaze to slowly travel up and down.

Vapor looked like sex come to life. Every inch of his tight body just begged to be licked, sucked and bit. Before he even realized it, Andrew had dropped to his knees to do just that. He licked his lips as he eyed up Vapor's thick cock.

"Not so fast," Vapor growled. "Since I won, I get to control this."

Before Andrew even realized what'd happened, he found himself face down on the grass as his pants were pulled down. Vapor ripped them off so hard that Andrew's shoes went with them.

"You could have just asked me to strip," Andrew gasped as he dug his fingers into the cool grass.

Vapor ignored his statement as he ran a hand down Andrew's ass. "Mine."

Okay, that should not have been a turn on. A shiver ran down Andrew's spine. "Yes, yours." He fully realized that Vapor had gone feral and he knew the sex wouldn't be gentle. So when he felt the velvet heat of Vapor's tongue rimming him, Andrew jumped, a surprised yelp escaping his lips.

"You like?" There was no mistaking the satisfaction in Vapor's tone.

"Yes." Andrew flinched when his voice cracked a bit.

Thankfully Vapor didn't call him out on it, instead he used his tongue and finally a couple well placed fingers to get Andrew slicked and ready. By the time he pulled away, Andrew had

begun to let out small mewling sounds of pleasure as he rubbed his aching cock against the ground.

"Fuck me. Fuck me," he chanted, not caring that he was coming off like some needy slut.

Vapor grabbed him by the hips and slowly pressed his cock inside Andrew's hole, finally giving him what he begged for. Andrew let out a long hum of pleasure as he arched his back, trying to take in every inch of the man's cock.

Andrew braced himself in anticipation of a hard pounding, but Vapor surprised him once again. Sitting back on his heels, Vapor pulled Andrew up to him so they were pressed back to chest. Only then did Vapor start to thrust in and out.

When Vapor started to rub his cheek along his jaw, Andrew asked, "What are you doing?"

All Vapor gave him was another, "Mine."

Andrew sighed and gave into it, deciding he'd worry about the weird behavior later. If he wanted to be honest with himself, he had to admit he didn't mind the rubbing at all. After a few minutes, he even joined in, pressing his face back against Vapor. All the while, Andrew bemoaned the fact the he still wore his shirt. If not for that damn fabric, he'd have more skin-to-skin contact.

Even though the sex was still a bit rough, and Vapor wasn't exactly whispering sweet words in his ear, Andrew couldn't remember ever feeling as strong a connection with anyone as he did at that moment. Each thrust, each groan, each caress added to that connection, too. Even when Vapor stopped doing that face rubbing thing and instead started to suck on Andrew's neck.

"Going to come," Andrew warned as he felt a tingle building up in his body. He both welcomed and resented the oncoming orgasm. While his cock hurt with need, he knew that once he shot off, it would be the end of this encounter with Vapor. After that, they would be going back to being enemies, to Vapor hunting him down.

Then Vapor let out a strangled cry before he stiffened and hot waves of cum bathed Andrew's ass. So Andrew stopped fighting it and let his own orgasm peak. He let out a yell that could probably be heard all the way back at the bar as he shot off, his semen painting the grass in front of them.

Sure enough, before Andrew even had time to catch his breath, Vapor gave him a light shove. "Get up and grab your clothes. I'm taking you in now."

Andrew closed his eyes, willing the hurt to go away. All the while, he silently berated himself for being sentimental and forgetting his place. Sliding off Vapor's lap, he asked, "So you're just going to fuck me and then toss me into jail?"

Vapor leveled a glare at him, all the earlier

passion and warmth gone to be replaced by that all too familiar coldness. "It's generally where we put felons."

Andrew nodded before lowering his head in defeat. All an act, for where he'd regretted his shirt earlier, now he said a silent prayer of thanks he still wore it. Turning his body just enough to hide his actions, he slid a pair of cuffs out of the front pocket. Specially crafted for shifters, they were designed to fit snuggly, no matter what form the wearer took.

Once he had them in his hand, he twisted back around and quickly snapped them on one of Vapor's wrists. Then just as fast, he snapped the other end to one of the fence posts. The entire process happened in just a matter of seconds and it seemed to take Vapor a moment to figure it out.

"What the fuck?" Vapor roared as he pulled on the cuffs.

Andrew breathed a sigh of relief as he noted the posts of the fence had been sunk into concrete. Even with his enhanced shifter strength, Vapor still wouldn't be able to pull free. Andrew ignored his question and got up to find his pants and shoes. As he put them back on, he made a point of not looking at the Panther.

"Are you just going to leave me here?" Vapor demanded.

Andrew felt a twinge of guilt until he

remembered that Vapor had been in the process of arresting him. "I told you. I can't let you take me into the coalition."

For the first time, he almost regretted that, too. It would have been nice to maybe go in and finally hear Mitchell's side of the story. The more Andrew grew to know Vapor, the more inclined he was to believe that maybe there was a smidgen of truth to his claims. Vapor may have done many things to Andrew, but never once had he told a fib.

Which would mean that Edward has been lying to us all this time. But why?

That answer came to Andrew with sickening clarity. Because he'd been using them to do his dirty work. He could only imagine how much Edward had made over the past couple years on jobs that he, Owen and Shane had pulled off.

Despite all that, Andrew knew he still couldn't roll over and go in with Vapor. He refused to leave Shane and Owen behind. Now fully dressed, he finally turned to look over at Vapor. The man was still naked, his clothes out of reach of his long arms.

Andrew kicked them a little closer. Since he knew the man kept his cell phone in front, pants pocket, Andrew took a tiny comfort in knowing he'd at least left Vapor a way to call for help. "I'm sorry," Andrew croaked and for the first time, he

actually meant it.

A strange ache built up in his chest at the thought of leaving Vapor behind, but Andrew knew he had no choice. He only had a half hour before he had to be back. If he came in late again, Edward very well could take it out on all three of them.

Turning, Andrew walked away. The entire time he had to fight the nearly overwhelming urge to turn back.

CHAPTER FIVE

La half hour until curfew, he still had to run all the way to the house once again to make it in time. As he pounded up the steps, he realized that this had started to become a habit. *Hello, déjà vu*.

He burst through the door, then stopped to catch his breath once he reached the front room. Bending over at the waist, he glanced up at the clock. Yes! He'd made it with five minutes to spare.

It slowly dawned on him that both Owen and Shane were standing there, identical looks of horror on their faces as they stared at him like he'd grown wings. "What? I'm not late." He pointed defensively up at the clock.

"What in the hell have you been doing?" Owen asked before he shook his head and held up his hands. "Wait, it's pretty obvious what you've been doing. I should be asking why in the hell are you being so stupid?"

"I don't understand," Andrew hedged before looking down at his clothes.

Fuck, he should have taken at least a couple of minutes to clean up some. His shirt and pants were streaked with mud and grass stains. Leaves and stray twigs were caught in his gun holster, too. Raising a self-conscious hand to his hair, he encountered various cowlicks and more foliage.

He groaned as he realized he may have been wearing a flashing neon sign that said, *Just been fucked*. He pasted a false smile on his face and decided to try bluffing his way out of it. "I got into a fight is all. Don't worry, the mission was completed."

"Bullshit!" Owen hissed, shooting a worried glance at Edward's closed bedroom door.

"You reek of something and I'm betting it's the Panther," Shane added, his lip curled up in disgust.

Andrew tossed a dirty look Shane's way. How dare he act offended at the thought of Andrew fucking Vapor? Shane had done plenty of worse sins in his short life. "Coming from the guy who fucked a lizard shifter?" Andrew countered.

Owen's mouth parted in shock before he glanced over to see how Shane would react. Andrew balled his fists as he waited, too. While Shane may care for Owen and Andrew, the guy still had sociopathic tendencies so there were no

guarantees he wouldn't get violent.

"I told you before. I was drunk and horny when that happened," Shane replied with a flippant shrug.

"Besides, Shane has never come home looking as rough as you do now," Owen added.

Andrew rolled his eyes before darting into the nearby bathroom so he could see what had their *Underoos* in such a wad. Going to the mirror above the sink, Andrew let out a groan as he finally got a gander.

Scrapes covered one side of his face, forming a nice road rash that he'd probably got one of the times Vapor had tackled him. His hair was sticking up in a way that only came from someone pulling on it in the heat of passion. Most damning of all though was a large hickey on the left side of his neck. Andrew ran a hand over it and a little shiver went through him as he recalled how Vapor had sucked him there. "Oops," he said.

"Oops?" Owen echoed as he and Shane crowded their way into the tiny room.

"Edward is going to shit donkey bricks when he sees you," Shane predicted grimly.

"I'll just take a shower and keep my neck covered," Andrew said.

Owen shook his head. "Don't you remember the time I fucked that rogue Puma? His stink stayed on me for a month. I tried everything to get it off me, even tomato juice."

Shane wrinkled his nose. "That's for skunk smell, not cats."

"Duh!" Owen rolled his eyes. "I know that now."

Fuck! That's what Andrew was and not in a good way. Shane was right. Once Edward sniffed Vapor's scent all over him, he'd be punished for sure. Frantic to make things better, he popped open and scanned the medicine cabinet. He searched inside for something...anything...that could be used to cover the smell.

"Andrew!" Edward's voice echoed through the house.

The three of them froze as they realized the gig was up. Letting out a small whimper of distress, Andrew pinned Owen to the wall and started to rub against him.

"Gah! What are you doing?" Owen tried to push him away.

"I'm trying to cover his scent with yours," Andrew explained.

"That may work. Owen has been so caught up in his latest project, I don't think he's showered in days," Shane drawled.

"Fuck you," Owen snapped as he continued to fight.

"We tried that before, but you didn't like it when I spanked you," Shane replied in a

monotone voice.

"That's a visual I never wanted. I'm going to need a *Unicorn Chaser* after that." Andrew paused in his attack, giving Owen the opportunity to wiggle away.

"Andrew!" Edward called again, this time with an angry bite in his tone.

"I guess I better just go in there." Andrew sighed.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Shane offered.

Andrew shook his head. If Shane went along, he'd just offer to take Andrew's punishment for him. While the gesture never failed to touch Andrew, it'd always just pissed Edward off more.

"No, why don't you take Owen and make yourselves scarce," Andrew suggested wanting to get them as far away from the line of fire as possible.

"It's past our curfew, too," Owen pointed out.

"Go to the workshop in the basement."

That plan got squelched when Edward issued his next order. "I want all three of you in here. Now!"

They exchanged looks of dejected resignation before silently filing into Edward's room. Even though Andrew purposely hung back, his mentor's bloodshot gaze immediately zeroed in on him. "Get your ass over here." Andrew took a steadying breath before moving forward and kneeling by the bed. Edward struggled to a sitting position, then slowly looked Andrew up and down. His lips pursed in disgust, making Andrew's gut clench with dread. Edward let out a low hiss and backhanded Andrew across the face.

Even in his sickbed, Edward still managed to pack some power in the blow.

Andrew's head snapped to the side as pain exploded in his jaw.

"Whore," Edward snarled. "Did you think you could come in here, reeking of that feline? That I would stand by and let you rut with that animal?"

"No," Andrew whispered.

"What?"

"No," Andrew replied, this time louder.

Edward grabbed a handful of Andrew's hair and tugged.

Andrew bit back a cry of pain as his head was brutally jerked to the side so the mark Vapor had left behind was exposed.

"Was he worth it?"

Yes! Andrew wanted to scream. It was worth every second of whatever punishment you give me. If I had the chance, I would do it all over again. My only regret is walking away after it was over.

But he knew to speak that aloud would only make whatever was coming much worse and that Edward might take his added fury out on Owen or Shane. Andrew forced himself to say, "No, it wasn't."

"Why do you test me like this?" Edward asked, his voice growing softer and almost caring.

"I'm sorry."

"Who was the one that took you in when nobody else wanted you?"

"You were." Although now Andrew had begun to doubt the truth to Edward's claims.

"Who saved you when Mitchell would have just as soon killed you like the animal he is?"

Andrew balled his hands into tight fists to keep his anger at bay. The one time he'd spoke to Mitchell, his brother seemed anything but a homicidal beast. "You saved me, Edward."

"And yet, this is the way you pay back my kindness," Edward tsked in great disappointment.

Just months ago, that comment would have drove Andrew to his knees in regret. Now it made his stomach churn. All those questions that Vapor had first brought up, rushed forward. Andrew realized that the only answer to them could be that Edward had been lying. It was the only thing that made sense. The way he kept such an iron control over them. How he never allowed them to speak with other shifters. It had to be because he was terrified of them figuring out the truth. That Edward hadn't taken them in out of the kindness

of his heart. He'd kidnapped them. Damn, how could he have been so blind to what Edward had been pulling? All these years, Andrew had actually believed that the man had loved them. Instead, he'd been using them to make a few quick bucks. To be his little supernatural puppets.

Regret sliced through Andrew. Vapor had tried to tell him all that, but stubborn idiot that he was, Andrew had refused to listen. What's worse is when the Panther had finally showed that he might actually care for him some, Andrew had paid him back by handcuffing him, leaving him naked and vulnerable. True Vapor had been trying to arrest him at the time, but that still didn't mean he'd deserved such treatment.

I am so sorry, Vapor. Will you ever be able to forgive me? "I didn't mean to dishonor you, Edward," Andrew groveled, not that he cared any longer what his punishment would be. As far he was concerned, he deserved some pain for what he'd done to Vapor. He only apologized for the sake of the others.

Edward still turned his fury on Owen and Shane. "As for you two, you should have told me that Andrew had grown to close to the cat."

"They didn't know," Andrew burst out. "This is all my fault. Please, don't blame them."

"No, he's right. I should have noticed," Shane cut in, just like Andrew knew he would. "If

anyone should be punished, it's me. So I'll take it for all three of us."

"Shut up," Andrew hissed. It so often seemed that he had to work just as hard to protect Shane from himself as he did Edward's wrath.

"You can't take another session on the kneeling rack," Owen butted in, adding his dos cents.

"Oh, but he will and much more," Edward cut in. "Andrew will spend the entire night there and I want you to sit next to him and watch every second of it."

Owen let out a low sound of distress. "You can't make him stay there all night. The pain will be unbearable."

"Do you want me to make it longer?" Edward challenged with a raised brow.

Andrew put a staying hand on Owen's arm. "No, he didn't mean any disrespect."

"Good. Now before you go, tell me how the mission went." Edward settled back against the pillow.

"I got the device on the car without being spotted. The contact should be happy." Which meant Edward would be happy because his damn money would be coming his way.

"Fine." Edward made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "You and Owen can go now. I need to speak to Shane alone."

Andrew rose to his feet and walked backward

to the door, for some reason not feeling comfortable enough to take his gaze off Edward. It wasn't until he and Owen had reached the hallway that Andrew breathed free again.

Owen started to the front room, but Andrew stopped him and made the shhh gesture with his finger. After a few seconds of what looked like some inner debate, Owen nodded that he'd be quiet. Only then did Andrew strain to hear the conversation going on in the bedroom.

"The tracker is becoming a problem and I don't like that," Edward said.

"What do you want me to do about it?" Shane asked in his usual clipped, monotone voice.

"I'm going to send you and Andrew out tomorrow. We'll tell him it's a job, but what we're really going to be doing is using him as bait to draw the feline out. When he goes after Andrew, I want you to kill the tracker. A bullet in his skull should make it so he never bothers us or Andrew again."

All the air seemed to leave Andrew's lungs as a heavy dash of fear slammed into him. While Shane may be like a brother to him and Owen, to anybody else, he was a deadly assassin. If Shane went after Vapor, one or both of them would end up dead. Either option would devastate Andrew.

* * * *

In the end, Vapor called Seth for help. For one thing, the Tiger knew how to keep his yap shut and for another, he'd be the least likely one to laugh at Vapor's predicament.

By the time Seth arrived, Vapor had grown cold and pissed. While he'd managed to get his pants on, his shirt had remained out of reach so half his body had been left exposed to the damp air. To top it off, he had mosquito bites in the most interesting places. He tensed in anticipation as he heard Seth's footsteps approaching. Glancing up, he watched as the Tiger walked into the clearing.

With white-blond hair that was cut in a sharp military fashion and icy blue eyes, Seth had the same ability of putting off others that Vapor did, which probably led to them being such close buddies. Until Seth had taken a mate, the two of them had gone on plenty of extended missions together.

Seth paused, his head titled questioningly as he took in Vapor's predicament. "I almost wish I had brought the fancy, new camera Noah bought me for my birthday."

"Just fucking help me and keep the comments to yourself," Vapor growled as he gave the cuffs a hard tug.

"Oh, come on. Don't be so grumpy. A moment like this should be commemorated somehow."

Despite his light teasing, Seth walked over and quickly popped the lock on the cuffs.

Vapor said a silent prayer of thanks that Andrew had used the same type the coalition did so the key Seth carried on him worked.

As soon as he was free, Vapor flexed his arm, getting the circulation moving again. Then he grabbed the rest of his clothes and finished getting dressed. Seth didn't say anything else, but Vapor caught the way the guy was eyeing up the scene. Then he made a big show of sniffing Vapor.

"You fucked him?" Seth accused.

Vapor snorted. "This coming from you. In case you forgot, you're mated to one of Andrew's litter mates."

"So are you going to take Andrew as your mate?"

He paused in strapping his weapons back on so he could shoot a venomous glare. "Andrew and I just fucked. That's it. We're not like you and Noah. He and I aren't going to be registering at *Bed, Bath and Beyond,* then going and pissing off the right wingers by getting married."

"I'll have you know that Noah and I registered at *Macy's*," Seth corrected.

Vapor didn't know for sure if the Tiger was kidding or not. "I can't believe I let him get the drop on me." Vapor ran his hands through his hair in frustration.

"Is that what's really got your tail in knots or is it because he walked away from you after you screwed?"

"Like I said before, Andrew was just a fuck. Nothing more." Even as Vapor declared that, he silently wondered how much truth there was to his words. All he could think of was how sweet Andrew's cries had been, the beautiful way his body had opened to Vapor, how good it had felt to hold the Jaguar in his arms.

Vapor realized he had to admit, at least to himself, that the connection between he and Andrew was strong. Stronger than anything Vapor held ever felt for another. "Shit!" he yelled at nobody particular.

Seth gave a knowing grin. "Would it help if I say I know what you're going through?"

"That's just it. You don't. Noah has never committed a half dozen crimes against the coalition."

"That is true."

"He's not a dirty thief either."

"No, he's clean and the only thing he's ever taken is the last beer from the fridge," Seth conceded.

"So, how can you even begin to compare the two?" Vapor asked as he finished putting his weapons on.

"Because they're both smartass punks, with

fuck-me smiles and tight asses?"

Vapor paused, trying to find an argument for that, but came up with nothing. "Okay, you do have a point there. But tight or not, once I get my hands on Andrew again, I'm going to kick said ass."

Seth scratched his jaw, his expression growing contemplative. "Why don't you let me help you wrap up this mission?"

Vapor scowled at him. "I don't need help. I never have."

"That's true and I don't have any doubt that you'll eventually be successful at this one, too. I just think it would happen quicker if you had some backup. Besides, I'm sick of Noah worrying over Andrew. So it would be more for him than you."

"I don't know," Vapor still hedged. Then it dawned on him that Andrew would never expect a new tracker to be on his tail. This could be Vapor's one and only time to finally get the upper hand.

"Come one," Seth wheedled. "Let me play, too. If you do, I'll give you a present."

"What?"

Seth reached in his shirt pocket and pulled out a bullet.

Vapor shook his head at the offering. "Thanks, but I already have my own ammo."

"I can guarantee you have nothing like this. This baby isn't just any bullet. It also carries a tracking device. So all you need to do is manage to shoot Andrew and we can follow him back to whatever den he's holed up in."

"I can't shoot him," Vapor protested.

"You can just make it a flesh wound," Seth countered.

"Would you be able to shoot Noah?"

Seth gave him a sly look. "No, but we're nothing like you and Andrew. Remember? He's just a fuck, nothing special to you at all."

"And that's all he is, too. That still doesn't mean I want to shoot him," Vapor growled before he walked away. The last thing he wanted was for Seth to call out his lie.

CHAPTER SIX

Andrew only waited long enough for Shane to go to the basement before getting up from the kneeling rack. Even though he'd only been on it a few hours, as soon as he moved, sharp waves of pain shot up his legs. He hissed as he tried unsuccessfully to rub the hurt away.

"What are you doing?" Owen demanded as he sprang to his feet. "If Edward catches you, you're going to be in bigger trouble."

"You heard the order he gave Shane. I have to find Vapor and warn him." Andrew started to move around the room, gathering up various weapons.

Owen went over and jerked on his arm. "You do this and you can't come back. You realize that, right?"

Andrew took in a deep breath. Yeah, he'd pretty much figured as much already. It didn't matter though. As he'd knelt there for those three agonizing hours, he'd come to realize something—Vapor was more important than him having a

place to live.

"We both know I wouldn't have lasted much longer here anyway." He shrugged. "Edward and I have been bumping heads way too much lately. It was only a matter of weeks before he got sick of me and kicked me to the curb."

"So, you're just going to take off and leave us behind for some hot-looking Panther?" Owen demanded angrily.

"You know it's not like that." Andrew briefly closed his eyes, unable to look at the hurt in Owen's eyes. "I love you and Shane like brothers. For as long as I can remember, it's been the three of us. I don't want to lose either one of you."

"Then why are you doing this?"

"Because..." Andrew trailed off before swallowing hard to work up the courage to add, "Because, I don't want to lose him either."

Owen put a hand to his stomach. "Oh my God, you've really fallen for this guy. Haven't you?"

"Yeah," Andrew admitted, shocking himself as much as he probably did Owen.

A heavy silence settled over them before Owen finally nodded. "Fine, but you're not going alone. I'm coming, too."

Even though it pleased Andrew to know he wouldn't have to face this all alone, he still felt compelled to ask, "Are you sure? Just because I'm giving up everything doesn't mean you have too

as well."

"I've never been surer of anything," Owen declared as he met Andrew's gaze.

Touched beyond words, Andrew just nodded. They both quietly gathered up some extra clothing and supplies before slipping out of the house.

* * * *

They had just pulled up to coalition headquarters when Vapor's cell started to ring. With a frown, he pulled it out and looked at the caller ID display. His heart leapt as he recognized the number belonging to Andrew. Flipping it open, he drawled, "Checking up on me again?"

"Look, we need to put this game aside a few minutes," Andrew replied, sounding strained.

"We did and I ended up in cuffs. Not exactly the type of bondage games I like to play."

Seth, who was behind the wheel, let out a stifled laugh.

"Look, I'm trying to be serious," Andrew snapped.

Vapor let out a grunt of anger. After the stunt he'd pulled, Andrew should be the last one to cop an attitude. "Why don't you drive your ass over to headquarters and we can discuss it there?"

"Damn it. Will you just listen to me? Your life is in danger."

"Really, is that a threat?" Vapor curled his fingers tighter around the phone.

"No, it's a warning."

"You've been trying to kill me for months now and I'm still breathing, so you'll have to excuse me if I don't get all worked up."

"This time it's not going to be me coming after you, but my friend Shane."

"So, there are more of you."

"Yeah, there's three of us who work for Edward. Me, Shane and Owen."

Vapor bit back a sound of surprise at the last name as he shot a quick glance in Seth's direction. The man had a missing brother by that name. "This Owen wouldn't happen to be a Tiger shifter, would he?"

"Yeah, how did you know?" Andrew sounded both surprised and suspicious.

Seth slammed on the breaks, then turned to look at Vapor.

The hope stamped on his face nearly broke Vapor's heart. "Lucky guess." Vapor drawled as he gave Seth a thumb's up. "Is Owen around your age?"

"Yeah, we grew up together. Do you want me to draw a bio up for you? Besides, it's Shane you should be worried about," Andrew snapped.

"What kind of shifter is Shane?" It always helped to know everything one could about their enemies and from the sounds of it, that was what this Shane was about to become.

"He's supposedly a Leopard, although we can't be for sure until he has his first shift."

"A Leopard?" Vapor repeated for Seth's benefit.

Leopards were the most vicious and unstable felines. They were so bad that they couldn't even live with other Leopards. So much infighting and aggression occurred between families that the breed had dwindled down to the point of near extinction.

Seth mouthed, Fuck!

A sentiment Vapor totally agreed with. Just when he thought the situation could not have sucked more.

"I need you to meet me somewhere," Andrew demanded, cutting into Vapor's troubled thoughts.

"Why? So you can blow up my car? Shoot me with my own gun? Handcuff me naked to a fence? Oh wait! You've already done all that."

"No, it's so I can protect you."

Vapor pulled the phone away from his face for a moment so he could shoot it a look of disbelief. "We must have a bad connection because I did not just hear you say that *you* had to protect *me*."

"I know how Shane moves and thinks. I helped train him," Andrew persisted.

A great big fuck off was on the tip of Vapor's

tongue before he thought the better of it. What better way to finally nab Andrew? After all, for once, Little Shit was actually running to him instead of away. "Okay. Do you know where Seven Lakes State park is?" Even as he spoke, Seth turned around and started to head out of the parking lot.

"Yeah, it's in Holly."

"Can you be there in forty-five minutes?"

"Sure," Andrew replied.

"Okay, meet me there." He purposely left off that he'd be bringing Seth with him. If Vapor had learned anything, it was that Andrew couldn't be trusted. So he didn't feel bad about ambushing him with some backup.

* * * *

"Where is he?" Andrew asked for the tenth time as he paced the dirt road.

"I'm sure he's coming. After all this time of chasing you down, he's not about to let this opportunity pass by," Owen replied as he scanned the large trees that surrounded them.

Ever since they'd arrived, Owen had been twitchy and acting apprehensive. He'd even caressed the butt of his gun a few times. A new habit since he usually didn't go out on jobs, instead, preferring to take care of the technical

side of the business. Not that Andrew didn't share his anxiety. While he now doubted most of what Edward had told him about the past, old fears still had him wondering just how welcoming Mitchell and the coalition would be.

"What if they don't want me? This whole thefamily-really-wants-and-loves-you spiel could all be a trap to get me to surrender. Then when I go there, instead of a happy *Little House on the Prairie* reunion, my sorry ass gets thrown into prison."

Owen didn't appear affected by Andrew's outburst. "My suggestion, make nice with your sister right away. Females are always the softest and eager to forgive."

Your sister. Even after all he'd experienced, those two words still seemed odd when used in connection to him. "I don't know. I said some pretty mean things to her last time I chatted with them." Andrew kept up the pacing.

"You mean the *only* time you talked to them. It's not like you were sending her daily hate emails and Tweets." Owen narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. "You weren't, were you?"

Andrew stopped pacing, so he could toss Owen an irritated glare. "Of course I wasn't. I had already taken enough of a risk by calling Vapor that one time."

"I told you the call or the phone couldn't be traced. I'm damn good at what I do." Owen

continued to sweep the surrounding area with his gaze, his fingers caressing his gun.

"Yeah, my very own personal Q just like James Bond," Andrew drawled.

"I wouldn't go that far," Vapor's voice cut in.

Both Andrew and Owen let out a gasp as they turned to the source. Vapor stood to their left, only feet away from him. He didn't look happy or friendly either. While he didn't have a weapon in his hands, the loose way he held his arms let Andrew know he was ready to pull one out if necessary.

"Oh fuck," Owen yelled.

Andrew started to tell him not to overreact, but Owen had already gone down that path and then some. With fumbling fingers, he pulled out his gun and trained it on Vapor.

"You don't want to do that, kid," Vapor warned.

"Damn it, Owen, put the gun away," Andrew yelled, his heart pounding in terror. Even without a weapon at the ready, he knew that it would take Vapor only a matter of seconds to take Owen out.

Another man burst out from the trees behind them. As tall as Vapor, but with blond hair, this one moved too quick to be human. Before Owen or Andrew could even think about reacting, the newcomer had a gun pointed at the back of Owen's head. "Yeah, Owen, put the gun away," Blondie drawled.

Andrew took one step in Vapor's direction before thinking twice and taking one toward Owen. Then he stopped as both uncertainty and anger surged through him. This was so not how he'd meant for this to go down. "You brought backup?" he yelled at Vapor, betrayal making him lose his normal self-control.

"Just Seth, I promise."

"What? Don't you trust me?"

As an answer, Vapor took something from his back pocket and tossed it.

The item stopped at Andrew's feet. Looking down, a heavy dash of guilt hit his gut as he recognized the cuffs he'd used on Vapor. "This is different," Andrew defended.

Vapor cocked a brow. "Really? How so?"

Andrew let out growl of frustration. Why was he the only one who could see the whole picture? "Because I'm trying to save your life, you stupid, stubborn asshole."

Seth laughed. "I think I like this brother the best of all."

Vapor glared at him. "I'll make sure to tell Noah you said that."

"I meant second best," Seth modified. He pushed the gun harder into the back of Owen's head. "Now, are you going to drop the gun or do I

have to stomp it out of your fingers?"

"Fine." Owen released his grip, the weapon falling to the dirt.

Seth bent down, picked it up, then tucked it into the waistband of his fatigues. "Not exactly the way I imagined our reunion would be," Seth told Owen.

Owen's brow creased in confusion. "Huh?"

Seth smiled, all the coldness leaving his eyes. "We'll talk about that later."

Andrew exchanged perplexed looks with Owen before returning his attention to Vapor. "You need to go back to the coalition and hide out for a while."

"Hate to break it to you, but I've never hidden from anything in my life."

"You've never gone against Shane before," Andrew tied to explain. "He's like the *Terminator* when given the order to assassinate somebody. He's relentless and won't care who else he hurts in the process of getting to you."

Vapor shrugged. "So, I'll just find and take him out first."

"No!" Both Andrew and Owen protested together.

"I don't want him hurt either. Look, Shane may be heartless, homicidal and mean, but we still love him like a brother."

"He's protected and saved our asses too many

times to count," Owen added.

"Ah, how cute, a psycho with a heart of gold," Seth drawled.

"We just understand Shane better than most do," Andrew said. "I may be able to talk him down from this mission, but not if you guys interfere."

Andrew finally dared to approach Vapor, slowly walking forward until he could reach out and put a hand on the Panther's chest. "Please, just do what I asked. I don't want to see you get hurt."

"No, just handcuffed and humiliated."

Andrew let out a soft sigh. "I am so sorry about that. I just wasn't ready to leave them yet."

"Who? Edward? I told you he'd been lying to you and you're just now realizing I was right?"

"No, I didn't want to leave Owen and Seth behind. Not with him." Andrew moved in even closer, wrapping one hand around the back of Vapor's neck.

"So now you're ready to run away to your family. Just like that?"

"No, it's you that I'm giving everything up for... Not them," Andrew stunned himself by confessing. As soon as the words slipped past his lips though, it felt as if a heavy anvil had been lifted off his shoulders. Then just as he'd stood on tiptoe for a kiss, Vapor had to ruin it all by stiffarming him.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Andrew stepped back and searched Vapor's face for a clue that maybe he shared the same feelings. All he found was the same cold, hard mask that had been pursuing him all these months. Any tenderness, affection or compassion he may have held for Andrew had obviously been left back at that fence.

Owen let out a soft, "Ah, fuck."

"Do you have any idea what I gave up for you?" Andrew demanded as he brought a hand to his stomach. He'd been a fucking fool. All this time he'd actually believed that Vapor had felt something for him, that they could have a future together. In the end, it had all been false. Worse yet, it had probably been a trick Vapor had used to finally catch his target. Duping the stupid kid into thinking that the hot, sexy, Panther liked him. "You used me," Andrew accused. Never had he felt so stupid in his life.

"I told you that he couldn't be trusted," Owen yelled before he turned his rage on Vapor. "You stupid fuck. You ruined everything."

Owen lunged at Vapor, only to be brought up short when Seth wrapped his arms around his waist and held him back. Owen let out an animalistic snarl as he continued to try and get to Vapor. "Easy there, big guy. I know you want to defend your friend's honor, but Vapor could chew you up, gargle the remains and then spit them out," Seth advised.

Andrew moved over to Owen and placed a calming hand on his arm. "Let's just get out of here."

"Where?" Owen demanded angrily, although he's stopped struggling with Seth. "We can't go back home and if we try to go to the coalition on our own, they'll just lock us up."

"Just me. You're not wanted for anything," Andrew reasoned.

"Only until they figure out it was me, not you who hacked into their stupid system," Owen blurted, as usual, completely losing all common sense when angry.

Vapor cocked a brow, Seth cursed loudly and Andrew sucked in a breath as he fought against the urge to choke Owen. Before he could call the idiot out though, the sounds of flapping filled the air. Looking up, he saw the sky alive with dozens of giant, black birds.

"Ah, shit, Ravens," Owen breathed.

"And if they're here, you know who probably sent them," Andrew pulled out two guns and got them primed.

Owen nodded. "Yeah, Shane and he's going to be pissed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Vapor eyed up the approaching Ravens, the familiar sensations of fear and excitement mixing in his gut. He always got that way right before a good fight and judging by the amount of birds coming their way, they were in for a doozie.

"Why would Shane be teaming up with Ravens?" Vapor asked, with a healthy dose of suspicion. The biggest enemy of the coalition happened to be Ravens, so he looked at anyone who associated with them with a jaded eye.

"Because they're easy to hire and they work for cheap," Andrew answered as he looked up. "I can't believe how quick he managed the round up this bunch though. Shane must have their number on speed dial."

Vapor couldn't help but notice how calm and collected the Jaguar appeared. Not an easy feat for any soldier, let alone one as young as him. "Do you use them often?"

"Me?" Andrew shook his head. "Nah, Shane and Edward are the only ones who associate with

them. Personally, I find them to be mostly jackasses, plus they smell—"

"Funny," Vapor finished for him. Most felines didn't care for the scent of Ravens.

"Yeah. One time I had to sit in a car with a pair of them and I nearly puked all over the place."

"I would have paid money to see that." Seth laughed.

Vapor noted the way Seth had moved closer to Owen in a protective manner. Owen shot his brother an irritated glare, but it seemed obvious from the way the kid handled his gun the he should be grateful for the help.

Andrew, on the other hand, seemed sure and almost cocky as he grinned up at the Ravens. He lowered his gaze to the trees and shouted, "Shane, why don't you call off your minions and come talk to us?"

A single gunshot rang out.

Before Vapor could even discern where it had come from, a blazing, hot pain exploded in his right leg. He glanced down and saw a small hole in his pants.

"Oh, no. He shot you," Owen gasped.

Vapor grimaced around the pain. "Gee, ya think?"

The Raven's started to circle overhead, each pass bringing them down a little closer. They managed to stay out of gunshot range, however,

making the situation all the more frustrating.

"That wasn't very PC, Shane," Andrew yelled.

It wasn't until Andrew placed his body between Vapor and a particular group of trees that Vapor realized where Shane's position was.

Andrew let out a growl of aggression before he raised the gun and squeezed off one shot.

One of the Ravens had either gotten foolish or brave and had landed on a thick branch. He took the bullet in the chest and dropped hard. By the time he hit the ground, he shifted back to his human form. The dark-haired, pale man lay on the dirt and didn't move anymore.

"You shoot one of mine, I kill one of yours," Andrew shouted in an oddly calm voice.

"Wow, lil' Jaguar is hard core. Are you sure he's Noah's brother?" Seth asked as he shot another Raven dumb enough to come into range.

"That's the only language Shane will understand," Owen explained as he tried to shoot his own Raven.

Vapor wasn't too surprised when the young Tiger missed by several feet.

"He sounds like a really nice guy. The kind you want to take home to Ma," Seth cracked.

Vapor let out a strained laugh before he hissed in pain. Even though it had only been a couple of months since he's been shot, he'd almost forgot had bad it hurt. "And yet, you two didn't want to leave behind the Happy Psycho."

"He means well and he does care for us in his own special way," Andrew explained as he took out another Raven.

Vapor couldn't help but marvel at how great of a shot he was. He could have put any military sniper to shame.

"Yeah, you'll notice he didn't shoot either one of us," Owen added, almost happily.

"Well, how stupid of us to think he didn't love you. Does he also kill small game and leave it at your doorstep as a token of his love?" Seth asked.

"Only once in a while," Owen said.

Vapor paused for a moment so he could glance over at the Tiger. Surely he had to have been kidding on the last comment, but Owen's face remained as serious as ever. Vapor shook his head. This makeshift gang of theirs had to be the most dysfunctional and crazy group of humans or shifters that he'd ever encountered. "You guys make the Firefly family look normal."

"Who?" Andrew asked.

"They're from the horror movies, 1000 Corpses and The Devi's Rejects," Seth explained.

After that all the bullshit talk ended because the Raven's attacked at once. Vapor started shooting as fast as he could, all the while fighting the pain in his leg. A warm, trail of blood started to trickle down. Vapor grunted in frustration. If the Ravens

would only land and change, then he'd be able to shift into his Panther form. Not only would he be better equipped to rip their throats out, but the shift would also heal his bullet wound.

The Ravens continued with the circle attack. Every once in a while a few dived down to claw at the felines. One of them caught Seth across the chest, drawing blood, as four deep furrows were left behind. Owen got caught in the cheek by another set of Raven claws and soon his white t-shirt became crimson.

Meanwhile, the pest, AKA Shane, kept taking shots at Vapor and Seth. Each report of gunfire was punctuated by Andrew yelling, "No! Bad Shane!"

Vapor had nearly decided that they should make a very un-macho run for it when the birds finally cooperated and landed. As soon as claws hit the ground, they each shifted to human form.

For some strange reason, all Ravens had the same features—dark, oily hair, unnaturally pale skin and black, soulless eyes. Maybe it was just a quirk of the species or perhaps it was due to inbreeding. All Vapor knew was it skeeved him out.

They wore the standard uniform for their breed, black leather from head to toe.

Vapor wondered what cows had done to piss the Ravens off so much because he'd never seen one in any different type of fabric. PETA would be so disappointed in them.

Both he and Seth immediately shifted to their animal forms. While bullets and guns were great, nothing could compare to feline shifter's supernatural speed and strength.

When Owen and Andrew didn't follow suite, it only mildly surprised Vapor. They were still on the young side, since most felines didn't shift until around their twenty-fifth birthday. Plus, he doubted that anyone had taken the time to train them on how to do it properly.

As Vapor allowed himself to settle into his Panther body, he gave an internal sigh of relief as the bullet wound healed. Unless an injury was too severe, most time a shift would always make them better, so he knew the Seth's claw marks would mend as well.

The Raven's saw them approaching and started shooting. This time Vapor saw it coming in time and dodged the bullets. His target still stood several feet away, but that was just a leap for a Panther. Vapor jumped, hitting the Raven in the chest and taking him down.

As he finished off his enemy, he could hear Seth's victorious snarls in the distance.

One of the remaining Ravens tossed down his gun. "Fuck it. He's not paying us enough to take on this many cats." He left, shifting back into his

bird form. The other's followed his lead and soon they had disappeared from view.

Both Vapor and Seth shifted back to their human forms.

The first thing Vapor did was to look over to make sure Andrew had managed to get through the fight unscathed. While Andrew appeared unhurt, Owen continued to bleed. Andrew stripped off his own outer shirt, leaving him wearing just a thin white t-shirt. He pressed the black one to Owen's head to staunch the flow of blood.

Vapor wanted to run over to Andrew and hold him in a protective embrace. He yearned to run his hands over the Jaguar's body, just to reassure himself that he truly was unhurt. He held back. Not only did they still have Shane out there and he probably posed a bigger risk than the Ravens, but Vapor didn't want to lead Andrew on. The last thing Vapor wanted or needed was a damn committed relationship.

So why did he still feel guilty for hurting Andrew so badly? When he'd seen the way Andrew's face had fallen at his harsh words, Vapor had felt like somebody had kicked him in the gut.

Could he actually be starting to care for Andrew? If so, was he ready to take on a mate that would soon have a very large family tagging along? All of Mitchell's siblings lived in one dwelling that took up the entire back area of headquarters. After Seth had claimed Noah, he'd moved in there, too. It wasn't just him either, all of the mates lived there. Just the thought of having to live in the same home as Mitchell made Vapor shiver a bit.

Not that he didn't like the guy. Vapor had never had a leader who he respected and admired more. That still didn't mean he wanted to be around Mitchell, twenty four-seven either.

Besides, when Andrew did come home, he would get all the love and support he needed. It would be a huge adjustment and Andrew needed to surround himself with happy, relatively well-adjusted people. Not someone like Vapor, who'd never had any kind of relationship. Crap, he didn't know if he was even capable of loving someone. Not after his uncle had done everything he could to beat that trait out of him.

Vapor decided that, even though it would hurt them both at first, he would have to pull away from what had been developing between him and Andrew. Once Andrew got home and realized how fucked up Vapor was, he'd be thankful.

They approached Owen and Andrew cautiously. All the while Vapor had anticipated that Shane would try to finish the job, so it didn't surprise him when a thin, short, young-looking

male came out of the trees.

"Shit, he's just some kid," Seth whispered.

Vapor nodded in agreement. Not only did Shane look like he'd barely left his teen years behind him, but the feline had an almost adorable, angelic face.

All the better to hide a dangerous predator. Most of his kills probably didn't even think he was a threat until it was too late.

Then Vapor looked into the kid's gaze and his blood ran cold. Shane's gaze seemed nearly as empty and soulless as the Ravens. Until he glanced over and seemed to notice Owen's injuries for the first time. Vapor kept his gun in his hand and at the ready. While Shane didn't look like he'd be making any more aggressive moves, Vapor didn't trust that he wouldn't if something provoked him. The throbbing pain in his leg served as a reminder as just how deadly this kid could be.

"You're hurt," Shane observed in a soft voice.

"Thanks to one of your buddies," Andrew shot back angrily.

"Nobody told you to leave Edward and go to the enemy," Shane returned.

"Did you honestly expect me to stand by and let you kill Vapor?"

"No, I knew you'd try to rescue him. You care for him."

The slightly confused tone to Shane's voice made Vapor wonder if Shane actually understood the concept of caring for another. Probably not since most Leopards seemed incapable of any form of love or compassion. He'd once seen two Leopard brothers get into a fight so vicious that they both ended up dying from their injuries. If he lived forever, he doubted he'd ever be able to figure out that particular breed of feline.

Seth moved forward to Owen and knelt down by him. Now that nearly all of the excitement had died down, Vapor finally studied the younger Tiger for the first time. Vapor couldn't help but note the great similarity between the two. Owen looked like a slightly younger, more stylish version of his older brother.

"Just let us go. I don't want to have to fight you," Andrew pleaded with Shane.

"I have no choice. Edward gave the order," Shane persisted.

Damn it. Vapor had hoped that maybe once Shane had seen Owen was injured, the Leopard would be willing to put his order to assassinate behind him. From the way Andrew and Owen acted, it was obvious they cared for the cute, little, homicidal maniac. Vapor didn't want to have to upset them anymore by hurting their buddy, but he didn't see a way around it.

Then he caught the way Shane's fingers

twitched and he knew the Leopard was getting ready to start shooting again.

"Oh, I've had enough of this," Vapor snarled. Moving quick, he aimed his gun at Shane and squeezed off a shot. It hit Shane in nearly the exact same spot as where Vapor's earlier injury had been.

Shane let out a cry of pain as he went down.

Vapor took that opportunity to go over and strip the weapons off the man. "There, now we're even. You shot me and I shot you, "Vapor declared as he stepped back. Next, he took out a set handcuffs similar to the ones Andrew had used on him earlier. Turning to Andrew, Vapor spun him around and quickly cuffed the Jaguar's hands behind him. While he'd hoped to have more time to talk things out with Andrew and ease him into surrendering, Vapor didn't want to hang around any longer than necessary. Even injured, Shane still posed a threat and Vapor didn't want to have to make the next shot he took at the kid a kill one.

"What are you doing?" Andrew demanded, his face growing red with fury.

"What? You think just because we fought off some Ravens I'm going to let you get away? Like Shane has a job to do, so do I. So, on behalf of the coalition, I'm placing you under arrest." Vapor forced his voice to be cold and all business. It was hard though, especially when he caught the look of hurt flickering over Andrew's eyes.

Vapor didn't spare Shane another glance. He just led Andrew back to the car. About halfway there, Andrew started to struggle a bit, but without his weapons, he didn't stand a chance against Vapor's strength. With each step, Vapor's heart felt a little more heavy. He thought that after all this time he'd be thrilled to finally have got his target. Instead, he felt like he'd betrayed Andrew and what they could have had if only things had been different.

"You don't have to do this. I already told you I was going in," Andrew protested.

"After the whole handcuff incident, I find it hard to trust you." Vapor glanced over his shoulder. Seth had scooped Owen up in his arms and had started to follow Vapor.

"We can't just leave Shane lying there all helpless and injured," Andrew argued.

"Trust me, nothing about Shane is helpless. He can worry about getting treatment for his wound on his own, since he earned it while trying to kill me," Vapor said, before glancing back over at the Tiger brothers. Vapor frowned as he noted how bad Owen continued to bleed. "Can Owen shift?"

Andrew paused in his struggles long enough to answer, "He's only done it once and it didn't go too well for him."

"What happened?" Vapor's heart lurched. So

much could go wrong during a first shift if the feline didn't have the proper training. He still remembered horror stories about shifters who got stuck in between, or those who went mad from the pain.

"It hurt him, bad. He had it even worse than me."

"You can shift?"

"I've only done it once, too. After that, Edward forbade me to do it again. He said it wasn't natural or healthy to give into my animal side," Andrew admitted, shame faced.

"Damn, he's really messed you all up."

Andrew shrugged, but for the first time, didn't rise to Edward's defense.

"If I put you in the front seat with me, do you promise not to try anything?" Vapor demanded, trying his damndest not to be affected by the forlorn way Andrew carried himself.

Once they got to the car, they paused by the passenger side as they waited for Seth to catch up. Vapor looked down at Andrew's lowered head and that proved to be his undoing. Reaching down, he cupped Andrew's chin and forced him to look up.

"I'm sure once Mitchell hears how you came to warn me, then helped fight off the Ravens, he'll pardon you," Vapor soothed.

"I didn't do it for him." Andrew's eyes watered

a bit before he shifted them to the side and blinked furiously.

"I know you didn't." Ignoring the little voice in his head, warning him to pull away, Vapor lowered his head.

"Was it really just a fuck to you?" Andrew whispered, their lips just inches apart.

Even though he knew it would be better for both of them to say yes and sever all ties, Vapor found he couldn't keep up the mean guy act any longer. "No, it meant just as much to me as it did to you."

It did, too. Vapor finally had to admit to himself that somewhere during the past few months, this little shit of a Jaguar had somehow weaseled in under the radar. Now he'd found his way into Vapor's heart and there was no going back for either of them. "I'm going to do everything in my power to protect you," Vapor vowed as he fanned a finger over Andrew's bottom lip.

"Will it be enough?" Andrew asked as he briefly darted his tongue out to lick at Vapor's caress.

God, Vapor hoped so because the mere thought of his Jaguar caged up and suffering nearly killed him. Keeping those dire predictions to himself, he lowered his head and sealed his vow with a soft, sensual kiss. Andrew let out a little whimper, his tongue darting out to slide over Vapor's lips.

"Ugh! Do you have to make out with your boyfriend in front of us? As if I'm not in enough pain," Owen groused.

They pulled apart and Vapor shot the brothers an irritated glare. "Maybe you and Seth need to learn how to duck better. In case you didn't notice, neither Andrew or I got clawed."

"No, you just got shot in the ass," Owen pointed out.

"It was the thigh," Vapor defended. The last thing he wanted was it to get around the coalition that he'd pulled a Forrest Gump and *got shot in the* buttocks.

"Whatever," Owen sighed before he gifted Seth with a dirty look. "Seriously, dude. You can put me down now. It's just a couple of scratches."

"And a couple pints of blood," Seth added, showing a protective side Vapor had only seen him use with Noah before now.

Owen gave a short bark of laughter. "I wouldn't go that far. Besides, head wounds always bleed the worst."

"What, are you, a doctor?"

"No, but I am a trained medic," Owen pointed out with a proud smile.

"Edward had Owen take classes so somebody could tend to any wounds we received on the job," Andrew explained.

Vapor had to admit that would make sense to a

group of thieves who wanted to fly under the radar of the shifter world. It wasn't like they could go to a human hospital either. While it was easy enough for them to pass for *normal* when still children, as they grew older, it became more difficult as their bodies started to mature and change.

"So, you're a hacker and a medic? Ah, my baby brother is multi-talented, I'm so proud," Seth said sarcastically as he gently set Owen on his feet.

"I'm not your brother," Owen mumbled.

"Yeah, because there are so many displaced Tiger shifters named Owen who have blond hair and blue eyes," Vapor quipped as he opened the door for them.

Owen started to climb in, but stopped and pinned Seth with a hard stare. "So, if you really are my brother, then I have a question for you? Did Mom and Dad really sell me to Edward?"

Seth took in a shuddering breath.

While the same cool expression remained on his face, Vapor had known the Tiger long enough to see how much that question stung.

"Mom and Dad are dead, but they would never have given you up. Me either. It wouldn't have mattered how much Edward offered us," Seth said.

Owen continued to study him for a few more beats before he finally gave a curt nod and climbed into the back seat.

Seth started to follow before Vapor reached out and stayed him. "You realize that he's in as much trouble as Andrew now that he admitted to being the hacker?"

"Yeah, I pretty much figured," Seth replied before he got in the car.

"Thanks," Andrew said once they were somewhat alone again.

"For what?" Vapor started to frisk Andrew, to make sure the brat didn't have a key or something hidden away. While he was ready to admit that there was something going on between the two of them, he wasn't willing to trust that Andrew wouldn't try to bolt again.

"For not cuffing Owen, too."

"It's no big deal." Vapor shrugged. "I get the feeling that if I had to chase him down, he wouldn't be nearly as hard to catch as you were."

"It is a big deal," Andrew pressed. "Owen freaks out whenever his hands are bound. If you had slapped some cuffs on him, he might have lost it. He's already scared enough as it is."

"I take it he doesn't see much physical action?"

"He was the brains of the operation. I was the muscle."

"And what was Shane?" he asked, even though he already had an inkling to the answer.

"Shane was the executioner."

CHAPTER EIGHT

It took them a half hour to drive back to the coalition headquarters. The entire time, Andrew kept his head down and his trap shut. Really, what more could he say anyhow? By placing him in handcuffs and arresting him, Vapor had made his choice clear and it wasn't Andrew. No, it was the damn coalition.

Seriously though, what had he expected? That Vapor would declare his love and the two of them would run into the sunset while tripping through a field of sunflowers? That crap only happened in cheesy chick flicks.

"We're here," Vapor's voice cut in.

Andrew looked up and saw a large, rundown auto plant. The place looked like it could be anything but a highly secure, military headquarters. While it did have a fence around the perimeter, it was one of those cheap chain link ones and didn't appear to even be electrified. It only sported a single guard shack and he could

tell from the brightly lit interior only one man operated it.

However, Andrew knew that looks could be deceiving and the whole display didn't fool him for one moment.

"Andrew could break into here in under five seconds," Owen snorted.

"Really?" Vapor cocked his brow in a way that had begun to irritate Andrew.

"Yeah, your fence looks like a Home Depot special, you only have one guy guarding the gate and you don't even have good lighting over the parking lot."

"Do you agree with him?" Vapor asked Andrew.

Of course, he had to rise to that bait. Looking up from under his lashes, Andrew quickly swept the dreary looking building and the cracked, concrete covered parking area.

"You have no less than eight snipers covering the rooftops. Since I've heard that Mitchell is aligned with Hawks, I'm guessing that's who they are. That way they would be able to fly down quickly if needed," Andrew nodded to the areas where he suspected the gunmen were hidden away.

"Is that all?" Vapor prodded.

"The parking lot is dimly lit on purpose. There are several felines guarding different areas of the

parking lot and perimeter. Humans and many shifter breeds wouldn't be able to pick them up because they're hiding in the shadows." He finally turned in the seat so he could direct all his attention to Vapor. "It looks like a shoddy set up because that's the way Mitchell wants it to appear. He hopes that it will fool intruders into relaxing their guard."

Vapor appeared impressed.

Andrew couldn't help but be pleased. So he added, "Oh, and I'm sure several of those second story windows have gunman at them, too."

"Okay, maybe it would take Andrew ten seconds then," Owen conceded.

"The damn Tiger is probably right," Vapor muttered under his breath so low Andrew almost missed it.

"More like ten minutes," Andrew returned just as softly.

"You really think you could beat all that security?"

"I'd be willing to bet on it," Andrew replied, not bothering to hide his cockiness. One thing Edward had done well in Andrew's upbringing was to make sure he had the best teachers and instructors money could buy. Of course, all the classes dealt with topics such as burglary, safecracking and the like, but Andrew never complained. It was the one time as a child,

Edward had shown any real interest in him. When Andrew had excelled in his *studies*, Edward had even moved him to the top of his favorite list.

The lone guard from the shack came out and waved them through. Vapor pulled into the spot closest to a large double set of doors and turned the engine off. Andrew studied the building, searching for a sign of warmth. Anything that would give him some measure of comfort. All he encountered was more of the same drab, grey dreariness. "Does my family really live here?" Andrew asked.

"Yeah, they have a large apartment built at the rear of the headquarters. Since Mitchell is the leader, he's never off duty, so it's a given he has to live on site. The rest of your family stays there, too, because they're so tight."

"Is that a Jaguar trait or something?" Andrew swallowed hard as he imagined having to live around so many others. If he even had to worry about that. For all he knew, he could be molding away in their jail for the next twenty years.

"I don't know that many Jaguars, but from what I've seen, yeah. They tend to stick pretty close to each other."

"It's not so bad there," Seth added. "It took me a while to get used to it when I first moved in with Noah, but now I don't mind. Plus, don't let the word apartment fool you. The place is bigger than most mansions."

"We need to get inside," Vapor prodded gently.

Andrew nodded to show he understood before asking one last question. "You're going to go after Shane now, aren't you?"

"I don't have any choice. Not only did he attack us, but he's working with Ravens. Both of those are crimes in our society. The only reason I didn't arrest him right after the fight is I'm hoping he'll lead us back to Edward. Somehow I didn't think you or Owen would have gone so far as to tell us the location of your safe house. I will let you know that it will only be to capture Shane though. I won't kill him unless absolutely necessary. Given that their species makes them the way they are, it's always been Mitchell's policy to try to reform Leopards instead of eliminating them."

"But Shane isn't even part of the coalition," Andrew protested, desperation clawing at his throat. If they did hunt him down and Shane felt cornered, Andrew knew the Leopard would end up doing something suicidal or stupid.

"He's a feline living in Mitchell's territory. That makes him answerable to our laws," Vapor explained in an even let's-be-reasonable tone.

"Ugh!' Andrew made an irritated gesture at Vapor, the cuffs clinking noisily. "Don't you get it? For Shane, there is no other law but what Edward tells him. He didn't think he was doing anything wrong."

Vapor and Seth exchanged dark looks. "He shot me and then siced a pack of Ravens on us. How can you even begin to excuse that?"

"You shot him back, so that evens things up some," Andrew tried, already knowing the argument wouldn't wash.

Vapor just shook his head slowly before he rolled his eyes and got out. Going around the car, he jerked open Andrew's door. "Let's get going."

Andrew got out and let Vapor lead him to the doors. Vapor had to press the pad of his thumb against a sensor before the locks clicked open. As they walked inside, Andrew let out a gasp of shock. "Shit, this place looks like the set of 24 meets *Jason Borne*."

From the research he'd done on the coalition, Andrew had expected things to be high tech, but nothing like what stood in front of him. The inside of the factory had been converted to a highly efficient, professional and, dare he say, almost homey operation. Rows of computers and monitors lined one side of the building and the other side had been portioned off into separate offices. Even larger monitors hung high on the walls, each of the screens displaying something different. One had a map of the US, another CNN and yet another a real-time view of the nearby highway.

The color scheme, and yes the stupid felines did have one, was all rich browns and earth tones. Instead of an industrial type of tile, hardwood floor ran for as far as Andrew could see.

Men and women, mostly in uniform, ran around as they took care of various tasks. More than a few of them looked over at Andrew with more than a little bit of interest. He wondered if the cuffs were the cause of their curiosity or because they all wanted a gander at their leader's naughty brother.

He glanced over and saw Owen looked about ready to piss kittens as he practically drooled over all the technology. The dork even tripped over his feet a few times before finally running right into some large, dark-haired guy. True to form, Owen blushed twenty different shades as he attempted to stammer out what Andrew was pretty sure was an apology.

"Who's this little cub, Seth?" the man asked as he smiled down at Owen.

"None of your business, Garrett," Seth snarled as he tried to lead Owen away.

Owen pulled away from his touch and turned back to the dark-haired tower of muscles.

"I'm Owen." He grinned back at Garrett.

Andrew bit back a laugh. If he didn't know better, he could have sworn that Owen was flirting. A first for the normally bookish Tiger.

Garrett reached out and fingered one of the red dyed tips of Owen's hair. Seth let out a growl of warning, but Garrett either didn't hear or care. "How is it I never saw you around here before?"

Andrew noticed that Garrett had an odd scent. While it wasn't unpleasant, it didn't exactly appeal to him either. He cocked his head to the side before mouthing to Vapor, *Hawk*?

Vapor gave a curt nod before he pulled Andrew closer to him in an almost protective gesture. The move seemed unwarranted to Andrew since Garrett seemed interested only in Owen.

"I'm new here," Owen explained to the Hawk.
"One of the Lost Shifters who finally found his way home. About ready to be thrown in jail. You know how the story goes."

Garrett let out a low chuckled as he lightly traced the claw marks running down Owen's cheek. "What could someone as sweet and innocent looking as you have done to get into so much trouble?"

"I was really the one who hacked in the coalition's computer system," Owen bragged.

Andrew and Seth both let out simultaneous groans of despair. How could Owen be so stupid as to blab, once again, about his crime? He may as well wear a t-shirt that had an arrow pointing up and the words *Guilty* stamped on the front.

The Hawk laughed louder this time. "You did

that? You should have seen how much it pissed Carson off. I don't know whether to kiss you or buy you a pony."

"How about neither," Seth cut in angrily.

"I'll take the kiss," Owen offered, but Seth had already started to drag him away. Owen shifted his glance to Andrew. The Tiger had an excited, almost boyishness about him. "I think I'm going to like it here."

After they had walked a distance away, Vapor asked, "Is he always like that?"

"No, Owen never got out of the house much except to go grocery shopping."

"Why not?"

Andrew wrinkled his nose at him. How was it that after everything he'd told Vapor, the man still didn't get it? "Because Edward wouldn't allow it. We even had to ask his permission to take a piss."

Vapor grew silent for a moment before Andrew saw a rare flicker of emotion cross his face.

"So I'm taking you from one prison only to put you into another." Vapor sighed.

For some reason, Andrew felt compelled to comfort him. Even though Vapor wasn't the one about to go into the pokey. "Hey, maybe you'll be right and Mitchell will forgive me for what I did."

"It may happen. Especially now that Owen is taking partial blame for the hacking."

Andrew frowned, worried for his friend. While

Owen didn't have the same fear of being caged as he and Shane did, he still didn't like to be confined. "I hope Mitchell pardons him, too. He only did it because Edward ordered him to."

Vapor gazed down at him, his eyes so probing that Andrew nearly had to look away. "What happened if you disobeyed Edward?"

Andrew dropped his gaze. There was no way in hell he'd fess up to all the humiliating punishments he and the others had been subjected to. "We got our Wii rights taken away?"

"Now isn't the time for jokes." Vapor cupped Andrew's jaw and forced him to look back.

Shame filled Andrew as he gazed into Vapor's eyes. How could he possibly explain how he submitted so many times? Someone as strong and brave as Vapor would never be able to comprehend. "Don't you have to take me to my cell?" Andrew asked, changing the subject.

While he may be nearly shaking in terror at the thought being boxed in by steel bars, it still beat having to confess his past to Vapor. As they went down a steep set of stairs to what looked like a basement, it became harder to hide his building anxiety. He clenched his cuffed hands into tight fists and a cold, sticky sweat broke out over his body.

He realized he needed to get a fucking grip or else Vapor would catch on. He knew from personal experience that felines could smell fear. At the rate he was going, he'd be reeking of it soon, but with every step they took down the metal stairs, his chest grew tighter and his breaths more shallow.

Where it had been cheery and bright upstairs, the basement appeared as dank and gray as the outside of the building. The only lighting came from a row of florescent lights running the length of the ceiling. The air smelled wet and slightly moldy.

By the time they caught up to the others, Seth had already shut the door to Owen's cell. The brothers talked low to each other. While Andrew didn't catch all the words, it seemed that Seth was giving a pep talk to Owen.

Andrew felt a wave of irrational anger toward Owen. It's not like he ever had to face the numerous punishments Edward dealt out. He didn't have a fear of closed in spaces. Yet, he was the one who had family there to support him, while Andrew had nobody...just like always.

Then Andrew remembered how Owen had just given up everything for him and Andrew felt like a dick. Owen shot him a supportive smile and Andrew felt even lower.

"I'm going to be right across from you," Owen reassured him.

Andrew wanted to kiss the guy for not giving

away too much. "Yeah, we can toss our tin cups at each other, right before we sing sad songs," Andrew quipped in an attempt to hide his nerves.

"Where's Mitchell?" Owen finally asked the question that Andrew had been desperate to voice himself.

"He, Brent and Cassie are on a mission, but they'll be back soon," Seth answered Owen. "Jacyn is coming down to check out your scratches. He's a medic and works in the infirmary."

Andrew's heart leapt as he realized he'd soon be meeting at least one of his brothers. Vapor led him to a cell and took off the cuffs before shutting him in. As the lock, clicked shut, Andrew couldn't hold in the small sound of distress that slid past his lips.

Vapor paused, peering intently at him. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Andrew gave a weak smile to add some validity to his lie. "It's just the adrenaline crash from the battle."

"You do know I'm coming back to get you out of this mess, right?"

"Sure, I do." Wow, another lie.

Pressing against the bars, Andrew gave Vapor a quick peck on the lips. He then hurried over to the cot in the corner of the cell so he could lie down and close his eyes. Coward that he was, he knew

Stephani Hecht

he wouldn't be able to bare watching Vapor walk away.

CHAPTER MIME

Andrew didn't know how long he lay there on that hard cot as he tried to get his fricking emotions under control. At first, Owen had tried to talk to him, but had eventually given up when Andrew refused to answer him.

The fear continued to claw at his insides, almost feeling like a group of Ravens had taken up residence there. Andrew curled up into a tight ball, wincing when the movement hurt his already bruised legs. Now that the excitement from the fight had left his system, his old injuries began to ache even more.

He thought about how effortlessly Vapor had healed the gunshot wound simply by shifting. Damn, Andrew would have given anything at that moment to be able to do the same. He couldn't, though. Not only had Edward instilled in Andrew an aversion to giving into his animal side, but the one time Andrew had turned into a Jaguar it had hurt so bad, he almost lost his mind.

"Andrew," a soft voice called.

Sitting halfway up, Andrew glanced over and saw his brother, Jacyn, standing outside his cell. Taller than he was, Jacyn had slightly darker hair, but they both shared the same color eyes. He wore dark blue scrubs and had a stethoscope wrapped around his neck.

For the first time, Andrew found himself willing to go to one of his family members instead of running the other way. He got up from the cot and shuffled over to Jacyn. Each step sent fresh waves of agony up his calves and knees, but it didn't matter. All he cared about was getting closer to his brother.

Once he reached the edge of his cell, he wrapped his fingers around the bars so he didn't do something stupid like reach out to his brother. The one time he'd made the mistake of asking for any form of affection, Edward had laughed right in his face.

I'm not your father, boy. Do you honestly think I could care for an animal like you?

Hope shot through him when Jacyn moved in closer and wrapped his fingers around Andrew's hands. For a second, neither of them said anything. Andrew used that time to drink in his brother's appearance. While he'd had some photos of his family, the quality hadn't been the best. "Do you guys hate me?" Andrew finally asked.

"We could never hate you. That's not how our family works."

"But the only time I ever talked to you all, I said the meanest things."

Jacyn gave him a crooked smile. "Please. Brent said worse things to me this morning when I finished the last of his *Lucky Charms*."

Andrew tried to laugh, but his throat had become so clogged with emotion, only a grunt came out. "I really fucked things up. I believed the wrong things and now I don't know if it can be fixed."

"You'd be amazed at what Mitchell can do. You wouldn't believe some of the messes he got Brent out of."

"I know you need to go check out Owen's injuries, but I have one question." Andrew paused to get his courage before plunging on, "Did Mitchell sell me off or has that just been a big lie."

"Something tells me you already know the answer to that one or else you wouldn't be here now."

"I just need to hear it aloud from one of you."

Jacyn gripped Andrew's hands tighter. "Mitchell would never give any of us up. Just the opposite. He's been doing all he can to get us back. Why do you think he sent Vapor to track you?"

"Because I scared away all the others?" Andrew only half-joked.

"No, because Vapor is his best tracker. Mitchell has always wanted you home with us, where you belong."

Andrew nodded as he quickly blinked tears away. "Will you tell the others that I'm sorry?"

"You can tell them yourselves. Keegan and Noah are already bugging to come see you. I had to promise them they could come down as soon as I'm done. Plus, Cassie has called to check up on you at least five times already."

A warm feeling came over Andrew. It was so nice to actually have somebody give a damn. Jacyn gave his hands one last squeeze before stepping back. "Okay, you go to bed and I'll be right back after I check in Owen."

"Yeah, I'm kind of tired," Andrew admitted as he slowly moved to the cot.

He must have fallen asleep because the next thing he knew, Jacyn was in the cell with him and kneeling by the cot. Andrew blinked stupidly a few times as his brother's concerned face came into focus. "Owen told me you're hurt, too."

"Owen has a big mouth sometimes," Andrew replied groggily.

"Take off your jeans so I can see your legs."

Andrew balked for a few seconds until he realized that Jacyn wouldn't give on this. He still made a big show of giving a sigh of aggravation as

he undid his pants and slowly peeled them back. As the fabric brushed against his battered legs, he couldn't hold in the hiss of pain. He still managed to get them and his shoes off though. Jacyn's eyes grew wide in shock as he stared down at Andrew's injuries. Not that Andrew could fault Jacyn for the reaction since his lower legs were a mass of welts and deep, purple bruises.

"Owen told me how you got these." Jacyn reached out to gingerly touch one leg.

Andrew shrugged, pretending it was no big deal. "It was my fault for earning the punishments in the first place."

Jacyn paused, his mouth slightly open in shock. "That is complete bullshit! Nobody deserves this. If Mitchell finds out, Edward will be lucky to survive with his head intact."

"It's too late, I already know."

Andrew jerked his head up to find that Mitchell had soundlessly approached and now stood just on the other side of the bars. Mortified that he was in his underwear for his first real face-to-face with his leader and big brother, Andrew quickly grabbed the blanket and threw it over his lap.

"Hi," Andrew tried feebly. His embarrassment went up another notch. God, did he have to act like such a dork just because Mitchell was there? It didn't help that Mitchell looked so cool and put together. With his hair sharply styled in a military cut, a crisply ironed uniform and a set of muscles that would make a heavyweight MMA fighter jealous, Mitchell looked every bit the part of powerful leader.

"I have some bad news for you and Owen," Mitchell announced somberly. "I just heard from Vapor. They found the house you've been staying in, but not everyone made it."

"You mean Shane died?" Andrew asked, his voice cracking a bit as tears welled up in his eyes.

"No, the psycho lived. It was Edward. When they breeched the house, they found him already dead. They think he passed in his sleep."

Andrew became aware that Jacyn and Mitchell were both watching him for his reaction. The only problem was that he felt nothing. No pang of loss, sadness, regret...not even a smidgen of nostalgia. "Shane is going to be okay though, right?" Andrew pressed.

"Yeah, they'll both recover," Mitchell assured him patiently.

"How do you feel about Edward dying?" Jacyn asked as he placed a comforting hand on Andrew's shoulder.

Andrew averted his gaze down to the ground. "We never had a close relationship. I was more of a possession to him."

Neither Jacyn or Mitchell said anything for the longest time.

All the while, Andrew kept his head lowered, too ashamed to meet their gazes. Finally Jacyn nervously cleared his throat and asked, "Can you shift yet? I know you're a bit young, but we've had a rise in cases of early transformation."

"I've shifted only once. After that, Edward didn't allow us to do it anymore." Andrew nervously plucked at the blanket. He didn't add that he hadn't wanted to shift anyhow.

"Why would he stop you? I would think your enhanced skills when shifted would be an asset for him?" Mitchell asked.

"As crazy as it sounds, I think he was a little afraid of us when we took our feline forms. I never told Shane or Owen, but I've suspected for a while that Edward wasn't really a full shifter like he told us. There were times where I swear I could smell human in him, too. Plus, his other half wasn't even feline. He kind of reeked like a Raven, but his scent was a little riper if that makes any sense."

"He could have been a Crow," Mitchell mused. The fury in his eyes showed Crows didn't rate much higher than Ravens. "And I have heard of isolated cases of shifters and humans mating. The result usually isn't pretty. The child grows up with the urge to shift, but they never develop the capability. So, when Edward couldn't do it himself, he found some kids who he could live through," Mitchell bit out angrily.

"He always told us that our families sold us to him," Andrew added.

Mitchell let out a low growl of anger.

Andrew didn't flinch, because he knew it wasn't directed at him.

"That couldn't be further from the truth. We were able to trace all three of you through the human foster care system until you were each around five or six. Then you all just disappeared. We think he somehow managed to either fool the system into tuning you over to him and he erased the records, or he just outright kidnapped you."

"How would he know what kids to grab?" Andrew wondered.

"Even a half-breed would be able to sense other shifters," Jacyn told him.

"How did we all get separated in the first place?" That question plagued Andrew the most."

Mitchell's eyes grew haunted as he took in a shuddering breath. "A little over twenty years ago, the Ravens launched a mass attack on several feline homes. Since our father was the leader, our home was the first one hit. In the confusion of the attack, we got separated and I got injured. Brent managed to get Cassie out, but when he went to go back in for the rest of you, the house became engulfed in flames. We thought you all died."

"What happened to our parents?" Andrew's heart clenched in dread as he waited for the

answer.

"They died protecting us. They weren't the only loss that day either. By the time the Ravens were done, our death count reached the thousands. What we didn't realize at the time was the Ravens had formed a loose alliance with the Hawks. Unlike the Ravens though, the Hawks have compassion. So in the chaos of the attacks, they managed to save and relocate many of the feline children."

"I don't understand. Why give us to humans to raise? Why not just take us back to our families?"

"Because if they did that, the Ravens would have discovered their good deed and punished them for it. In the end, it didn't matter anyway. A few years after the attack, the Ravens turned on the Hawks and almost decimated their species. The few survivors left, now live here in Flint and work with our coalition."

"Brent's mate is their leader," Jacyn added.

Andrew released a pent in breath. So Mitchell really hadn't given him up after all. Vapor had been telling the truth, just as Andrew had suspected. That only left one matter. "So what happens to me and Owen now?"

Mitchell smiled. "Since you and he risked your lives to warn Vapor, I've decided to pardon both of you. Just promise me you guys will never hack into another system unless I order you to do it."

Andrew made the cross-my-heart motion with his finger. "We'll be good, I promise. What about Shane?"

"Shane is a whole different problem." Mitchell sighed. "Leopard shifters are always tricky to deal with and now we have one that's a highly trained killing machine."

"I have a suggestion," Jacyn cut in. "Why don't you send him to live with Dumb and Ass?"

"Who's Dumbass and why does Jacyn want to punish them?" Andrew wrinkled his brow in confusion.

"It's a nickname for a mated pair of Panthers," Mitchell said. "Their real names are Jared and Kevin."

"They just bought a whole bunch of farmland a little south of Flint, so their place would be perfect," Jacyn persisted. "They have a lot of patience, too, so they would be the right ones to teach Shane how to control his urges."

"I guess it couldn't hurt to try. Since there aren't any other Leopards in the area, Shane shouldn't be feeling territorial. Maybe now that he doesn't have Edward's influence, the kid will learn to mellow out some."

"I highly doubt it," Vapor grumbled as he walked up.

"You're already back," Andrew exclaimed, not bothering to hide his happiness.

"Yeah, thanks to that tracking device I planted on Shane, it was real easy to follow him home," Vapor punched the code into the control pad, opened the door and came over to sit on the end of the cot. Andrew couldn't help but notice that Vapor hadn't closed the door the cell behind him.

"What tracking device?" Andrew asked, wondering what he'd missed.

"The one that was in the bullet I used on him." Vapor grinned wickedly. "Of course, it was originally suggested I use it on you, but there was no way I could do that."

"Why? Because you wanted to throttle me with your bare hands instead?"

"No, because despite the fact that you shot me with my own gun, blew up my car and handcuffed me to a fence, I still care too much about you to even think of hurting you," Vapor admitted. "Now I just have to decide what I'm going to do about it."

CHAPTER TEN

Tever had Vapor seen anyone more fuckable and adorable as Andrew at that moment. His nearly blond hair had a chaotic, bed head quality to it, his face still had a bit of road rash from their previous encounter and he kept working his bottom lip over with his teeth in a nervous action. All of those things just added to his appeal, however, and made Vapor want him all the more.

Mitchell threw his hands up in disgust. "Damn it, Vapor, not you, too. Can't I trust any of my men around my brothers?"

"Sorry, Mitchell, if me throwing a grenade into the window of his favorite car isn't going to scare him away, I don't think your anger is going to work either." Andrew laughed.

Jacyn stood up and hooked a thumb toward the open cell door. "Hey, Mitchell, why don't we get Owen and take him to the infirmary."

"Fine," Mitchell grumbled. "But I expect Andrew to come back to the apartment. We have his room ready for him and it's big enough for two."

"Yah, I can't wait," Vapor mumbled, even though for the first time the thought of moving in with the Jaguar family didn't bother him. Not if it meant he got to be with Andrew.

On the way out, Jacyn gave a very subtle tilt of his head toward Andrew's covered legs.

Vapor gave a tiny nod to show he understood.

After they'd collected Owen and left, Andrew wrinkled his nose. "Are you sure about moving in with my family?"

"Yes, after all the trouble I went to catching you, I'll be damned if I'm going to let you go now," Vapor declared. If that made him a possessive bastard so be it. Andrew was his and damned if he'd stand by and not claim him.

"Oh, that's not what I meant," Andrew said quickly. "I want to be with you, too. I just wanted to let you know that if it makes you feel better, I can move in with you."

Vapor worked over that option for a second before shaking his head. "No, you need to be with your family so you can get to know them. I can put up with the crowd if it means I get to be with you."

"Are you sure?"

"I think I've been sure about you ever since that damn grenade incident. I just didn't realize it until I almost lost you for good when those Ravens attacked."

Andrew gave him the sweetest of grins. "You want to know a secret? I've known since then, too. Why do you think I tossed it in the window of your car instead of directly at you?"

"So if you care for me, I assume you trust me, too?" Vapor pressed.

"Of course I do. Didn't I prove that when I basically ran away from home?"

Vapor slowly slid the blanket back and sucked in a sharp breath as he saw the extent of Andrew's injuries. How he managed to even stand let alone fight like he did, was nothing short of a miracle. "Then why didn't you tell me about this?"

"Why would I?" Andrew shrugged.

Vapor almost yelled until he realized that Andrew was actually serious. It made him wonder how many times in the past his Jaguar had been hurt and there had been nobody around to care for him. "Because you're my mate and it's my job to take care of you."

Vapor's mind flashed back to some of the things they'd found at Edward's house. The boards on the floor that were obviously meant for torture, the closet that was empty save for a small stool and a lock on the outside. Now Vapor realized why Andrew had nearly panicked when he'd been put inside the cell. "I want you to shift

so your injuries will heal," Vapor ordered, softly.

Andrew shook his head. "No way. I'm already in enough pain as it is."

"It doesn't hurt if you do it right." Vapor reached out and helped Andrew to his feet.

"That's easy for you to say. You've probably shifted a hundred times. I did it once and it was only because I lost control and couldn't help myself. Edward got so mad that he..." Andrew trailed off.

"He what? We share everything now, remember?"

"He locked me in the closet for a whole day. He said that if I wanted to be an animal, he would treat me like one."

Vapor briefly closed his eyes so Andrew wouldn't see the anger in them. "I'm sorry, but Edward was a real ass."

"Oh, he was and I'm not sorry about it at all."

"I want you to forget everything he ever told you. Now close your eyes and just listen to my voice."

"This is so stupid," Andrew groused, but he did as instructed.

Vapor spent the next five minutes talking in soothing tones. He gave gentle instructions, first on how to relax and then how to embrace the animal inside. Just when he'd begun to despair that Andrew would never get it a right, light shimmered over him. After a few minutes, it dissipated, leaving behind a beautiful, speckled Jaguar.

"You did it," he praised as he reached down to scratch the Jaguar behind its ears. Vapor couldn't be for sure, but he could have sworn the cat rolled its eyes at him. Vapor gave him a light cuff on the head before ordering, "Okay, now I want you to shift back."

It took nearly another five minutes before Andrew had managed to shift back to his human form. Once he'd come fully back, Andrew frowned and looked down at himself. "Well, damn, look at that...my clothes are still on."

"Well, technically it's just your underwear and shirt," Vapor pointed out, going along with the game.

"Yeah, but it would be so much easier if they were already off. Then maybe we could already be fucking."

Andrew slid his shirt off over his head, revealing his tight abs and perfect shaped pecs. Next were his underwear, which he kicked to the side. He stood there for a moment, letting Vapor look his fill. Vapor approved, too. Even Andrew's long cock was perfection in the way it curled just slightly.

"This is where you get naked, too." Andrew grinned as he slightly tilted his head to the side.

"Last time I did that, I found myself in a very embarrassing situation," Vapor teased, even as he bent down to unlace his boots.

"That's not going to happen this time because I'm never leaving you again," Andrew vowed.

Vapor tossed his boots and socks across the room before moving on to the rest of his clothes. In a matter of seconds, he, too, stood completely nude. Andrew wasted no time crossing the distance between them and pressing his lips against Vapor's mouth.

Fuck, as sappy as it sounded, Andrew tasted like heaven. Vapor realized that they had not spent nearly enough time kissing. He made up for it now, using his tongue to slowly trace and explore every inch of Andrew's mouth and lips.

Once Andrew started to let out little whimpered pleas, Vapor moved lower. He passed the old love bite and gave it a visiting lick before moving down to suck on Andrews' collarbone. Andrew plunged his hands through Vapor's hair and let out a low moan.

"I love your mouth." Andrew paused, then clarified, "Or at least I love it when it's not telling me what to do."

"How's this for an order, Brat? Turn around and grab the bars." Vapor gave Andrew's lips one final hard kiss before spinning him around.

For once Andrew actually obeyed, his hands

wrapping so tight around the bars of the cell, his knuckles blanched. Vapor took a moment to enjoy the view. How Andrew's back arched perfectly and how his ass curved just right. Vapor spat in the palm of his hand and moved in.

"One of us really needs to start carrying lube," Vapor said as he used one finger to slick Andrew's hole.

"I'll start wearing a fanny pack and fill it with supplies." Andrew gasped as Vapor slid the digit inside.

Vapor closed his eyes in pleasure. Even though it was just one finger, the way Andrew's body held him made Vapor want to come right there. Then he added another finger and Andrew let out the sweetest of whimpers, his cheeks flushing with passion.

"Please, Vapor. I need you to claim me. Just like you did last time," Andrew moaned.

Vapor moved his fingers and spat on his hand again, this time using it to slick up his cock. Only then did he press slowly into Andrew's tight ass. The reaction from Andrew came so pure and visceral, Vapor knew he'd never forget it. Letting out a long sigh, Andrew's face grew into a mask of bliss as he arched his back even more, forcing Vapor deeper inside him.

That move shredded all of Vapor's self-control and he started to pump into Andrew in a fast,

almost frenzied pace. Andrew let out a cry of approval as he held onto the bars and started to thrust back into Vapor.

"You're mine now," Vapor snarled. "I better never see another feline touching you."

"Like I could want anyone but you," Andrew panted.

Andrew started to let out soft pleas for Vapor to grab his cock. Finally Vapor had mercy and he reached around and began to stroke Andrew in time to his thrusts. It only took a few passes, before Andrew came. He threw his head back with a yell as he shot off thick ropes of cum. At the same time, Vapor found his release, his dick emptying into Andrew's hot ass.

Just as Vapor came down from his after-bliss buzz, he heard the three most important words of his life.

"I love you," Andrew whispered.

* * * *

That evening Andrew finally got to meet the rest of his family. As he sat at that overly crowded and loud table in the chair they'd supposedly been saving for him for over twenty years, Andrew had never felt more unsure of himself.

His sister, Cassie, sat to his left and she hadn't stopped talking to him the entire meal. Around

the halfway mark, Andrew had given up on keeping up, so he'd resorted to just smiling and nodding. That arrangement seemed to be working for both of them.

"I can't wait to take you to the shooting range," she declared, fairly bouncing in her chair with excitement.

Smile. Nod. Nod.

"We'll have to get you fitted for a uniform, too. From what I hear, you're trained so well you'll be street ready really quick."

Smile. Nod. Nod.

"There are so many of us that Mitchell decided to hire a cook and maid just to help us keep up."

Nod. Smile. Nod. May as well mix things up a bit. Gosh, he already loved his sister, but she could be a bit overwhelming at times. Except when she smiled and doted on him. He kind of liked that, although he'd never admit it out loud.

"Give him some breathing room, Cassie," Mitchell admonished good-naturedly.

Cassie blushed. "Sorry, I'm just so excited that we finally have the whole family back together."

The family grew quiet as they all seemed to realize at once that there were no more empty chairs at the table. Mitchell's goal of restoring his family had finally been realized. Even Andrew teared up a little and he'd only been one of them for a few hours.

"I love you so much. Did I tell you that earlier?" Vapor whispered in Andrew's ear.

Andrew shook his head, a happy smile spreading over his lips. "You must have forgot."

Vapor chuckled, his breath fanning over Andrew's ear. "Well then, I'll just have to make sure I tell you every morning when we first wake up and every night before we fall asleep. That way I never forget again."

A blush came over Andrew's cheeks at the unexpected sentiment. "I love you, too."

"So now what?" Jacyn asked Mitchell.

"Now we have to help all the other fractured feline families find their lost ones. We've come a long way, but there are still a lot more displaced shifters out there, waiting to be found," Mitchell said, his face grave.

One by one all the family vowed to help out in any way they could. When it got to be Andrew's turn to speak out, a tense silence settled over the room as they waited to hear his response. Andrew grinned at Mitchell. "You just tell me what you need and I'll be there. After all, that's what family is for "

As Vapor pulled him into an embrace, Andrew realized that happy endings do come true. Even to a thief like him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephani Hecht is a happily married mother of two. You can usually find her snuggled up to her laptop, creating her next book.