



A Tempting
DISTRACTION

The Lost Shifters Series Book 7

STEPHANI HECHT

A Tempting Distraction

Hawk shifter Garrett has never been one to deny himself what he wants. So when he sees the newest addition to the feline coalition, a cute Tiger shifter named Owen, Garrett doesn't hesitate to make sure they end up in bed. Garrett only plans on keeping the encounter a one-time experience. Commitments aren't something he does and just because Owen is hot, great in the sack and charming isn't going to change things. Despite his resolve, Garrett finds that one taste of Owen is not enough. Which just confuses the hell out of Garrett since they couldn't be more different. Where Garrett is all business and serious, Owen is a hacker who dyes his hair in wild colors and dresses like a punk. Most importantly, Garrett is a Hawk while Owen a Tiger and the two rarely mate.

Owen, who has just been reunited with his coalition, has never known any kind of loving relationship. Raised by a cruel foster father, the only thing Owen ever learned was how to be a thief and a hacker. So when he finds himself thrust into a coalition and stuck with an over-protective older brother, Owen can't help but feel lost. The only bright spot in his life is Garrett. While Owen realizes that Garrett plans on keeping their encounter a one-time event, a part of him hopes that the Hawk will eventually want more.

Then Owen makes a stupid mistake that puts not only himself, but the rest of the coalition in danger. As Garrett realizes that he may lose Owen, he knows that nothing will stop him from saving the Tiger, even if he has to sacrifice himself in order to do so.

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The Lost Shifter Series Book Seven

By

Stephani Hecht

Dedication

To Jake and Riley.

Chapter One

It's funny how he found such comfort in being in a church, given that he'd never stayed around long enough to listen to an actual service.

Then again, until recently, he'd hardly ever seen the outside of his various childhood homes period. If one could call what he'd grown up in as homes, since in all actuality they were nothing more than a prison in the guise of two-story ranch dwellings. The only time his guardian had ever let him step foot out had been to do the grocery shopping or to help one of his foster brothers, Andrew or Shane, on a mission that called for Owen's specialized skills.

Owen settled into one of the many, heavy oak pews lining the entire width of the church. He had his choice of seating since, given the late hour, he alone occupied the building. Although, because it was Flint, the city continued to bustle elsewhere. His heightened shifter hearing picked up the distant sounds of traffic, a couple arguing in a nearby alley and the jets from a nearby airport. Instead of feeling resentful of the auditory intrusion, Owen drank it in. The sounds letting him know that he wasn't isolated anymore.

Breathing in deep, he savored the scents of dust, old leather and melting wax. Those smells also served to soothe him, although if asked why, he'd be hard pressed to give reason. Whatever it may be, it had drawn him there every night for the previous couple of weeks.

He scanned the interior of the building, appreciating the beauty of the architecture. The stained glass windows lining both sides of the sanctuary were sheer works of art. While he'd never been to Sunday school, he still could identify many of the Biblical scenes showcased in the windows. One depicted the Prodigal Son and he couldn't help but see the irony in how it paralleled his own life, although his own separation from family had not been willing.

A heavy wind blew outside, making the ancient building creak. Owen strained his ears, always on alert for the telltale sounds of wings flapping that would alert him to Ravens approaching. In his previous life, the bird shifters had never bothered with him or his two foster brothers, now that they'd gone into the fold of the feline coalition, things had changed.

If his older biological brother, Seth, knew that Owen snuck out nearly every night, the Tiger shifter would be beyond pissed. Even though they'd only been reunited a few months, Seth had made it his personal mission to protect Owen at all times. For someone who'd grown up basically having to fend for himself, the restrictions and coddling grated on Owen.

Still, he knew Seth meant well, so Owen kept his feelings close to his chest. The wind blew again. Almost on reflex, Owen pulled his battered jean jacket closed. While the air in the church didn't nearly carry the same bite as outside, it still felt chilly. Owen was loath to leave though, for that meant going back to headquarters.

As he resigned himself to his present situation, he allowed his mind to wander to more mundane things. He'd been given a makeshift lab to use and he had several projects in development. For the first time since he'd been rescued he actually felt a little excited about his work. Even if he didn't harbor any aspirations that somebody would have much use for any of what he produced. Not when they had the coalition's vast array of expensive, military issue equipment at their disposal.

Although there was one project, that if successful, may finally earn him some much wanted respect within the coalition. Then, maybe, they'd all stop looking at him with jaded expressions. Most of all, it just may finally earn Seth's respect.

He was so caught up in his thoughts that he didn't realize he had company until someone slid into the pew next to him and pressed their hard body close to his side. On instinct, Owen made a move for the gun he always carried in the inside pocket of his coat. His hand barely moved a few inches before strong fingers reached out and grabbed him into a painful, tear-inducing hold. Biting back a cry of alarm, he looked up to find himself looking into the dark-eyed gaze of Garrett. One of the Hawk shifters who aligned themselves with his coalition, Garrett was a friendly face and no threat. Relief washed over Owen as he realized he wasn't about to be attacked. Then just as quickly, his heart picked up speed again, this time for an entirely different reason, because...well, it was Garrett.

On his first day at the coalition, Owen had literally run into the handsome Hawk and ever since then, he had a thing for Garrett. Everything about Garrett called to Owen in a way no other had before, from the man's dark-as-midnight hair styled in a sharp military cut to his dark intense eyes that seemed to carry the weight of the world in them. Add into it that Garrett's body had the perfect build of thin, without too many muscles and Owen was nearly drooling in appreciation.

Not that he could ever let on that he had a mad schoolboy crush. Nooooo...that wouldn't be cool, and nerd that he was, Owen already had enough against him. The last thing he needed was to be caught panting like some girl at a Justin Bieber concert.

Garrett must be on duty because he wore the all black camouflage that was standard issue for the soldiers working for the coalition. Owen had seen the uniform countless times on Seth. Although, in his opinion, it looked much better on Garrett. Even the numerous weapons strapped to the Hawk's body managed to come off as sexy.

"Are you a fucking idiot?" Garrett snapped by way of greeting.

Owen paused, mouth open a'la idiot style as his stomach dropped. Well, that hadn't exactly been a good start to their first real conversation. He clamped his lips shut before giving a slight shrug. "Some have accused me of that in the past."

The smartass answer had been his way to lighten the mood and Owen realized it'd fallen flat when he didn't earn even a hint of a smile from Garrett. If anything, it only seemed to piss the Hawk off more as he continued to hold Owen's hand in an iron grip. While Owen had hoped for the longest time that Garrett would touch him, this wasn't exactly what he had in mind.

"Does Seth know you're out here?" Garrett demanded, his face hard and devoid of any compassion.

As if Owen were a child who couldn't take care of himself. While he may not be the badass fighter like Andrew or Shane, his guardian had still managed to beat basic survivor skills into Owen so if he were attacked, he could handle his own. For Garrett to suggest otherwise slapped him as insulting. That made Owen angry enough to dig up his own attitude. "Gee, I didn't know I had to have a hall pass before I was allowed out to play. Maybe Seth should fit me with one of those kiddie leashes so I don't wander too far."

"This isn't funny. I was able to approach without you even sensing me. I could have slit your throat and you wouldn't have had time to even notice until you were already bleeding out."

"What makes you so sure I wasn't aware of you the whole time?" Owen challenged. No way in hell he'd admit that he'd been caught with his head up his ass. He jerked his hand away and resisted the urge to rub away the hurt left behind by Garrett's hold.

"Because I could smell the spike of fear going through you when I first sat down. You should know better than anyone that shifters are really good at sniffing out bullshit, kid."

That stung, both because of the backhanded way Garrett alluded to Owen's criminal past, and the way he'd added the tag of kid on the end. While there may be a gap between their ages, Owen would be willing to bet it wasn't that much. While shifters matured slowly, making it difficult to discern their true age just by glancing at them, Owen had heard the Hawk was in his late twenties. That only put a few years between them. Owen found himself starting to wonder what he ever saw in the Hawk shifter. Sure Garrett had a body made for drooling over, but looks only went so far.

"You may not be lucky next time and it'll be an unfriendly stalking you instead of me. If the Ravens had stumbled across you before I did, they'd have ripped you apart or worse, held you for ransom," Garrett continued to lecture.

Owen shook his head. "They wouldn't do that."

"Why because you and your two delinquent foster brothers used to hire them to do your dirty work? I hate to break it to you, Owen, but Ravens don't believe in loyalty. Especially now that they've realized Andrew's close association to the leader of the feline coalition."

Yet another reference to his past. Owen bit back an angry curse as he gripped the back of the pew in front of him so hard his knuckles popped. Damn, you hack into the coalition's computer system once, steal a few thousand from some wolf's safe and tranq one feline shifter and they want to brand you forever.

"No, I meant they wouldn't hold me for ransom. I'm really not a big player or of any importance to the coalition so it's not like they could get much for me. I'm probably not even worth enough to buy a tank of gas."

Owen tugged nervously at his bangs. While it had seemed a good idea to dye the tips of his blond hair red this morning, now he felt painfully inadequate in front of someone as handsome and put together as Garrett. Owen's gaze drifted down to his own ratty jeans and sneakers that had holes in the toes, resisting the urge to cringe at his sloppy appearance. It didn't help his comfort level as he thought about his pierced ears, eyebrow and nose. Garrett no doubt thought of Owen as a punk or a delinquent like Andrew and Shane.

"Seth is Mitchell's brother-in law, so that makes you important because of that union," Garrett pointed out.

"No, that makes Seth and his mate, Noah, important. It just means that I'm forced to live in their overcrowded apartment because my brother refuses to allow me to move anywhere else," Owen returned, although to call the huge dwelling an apartment didn't feel right since the place dwarfed most houses.

"I take it you don't find your current living arrangements agreeable?"

"Hell no, I feel like I've been dropped in the middle of Big Brother, Shifter Addition. Only there isn't a half million dollar prize up for grabs." Owen remained painfully aware of the press of Garrett's body against him. Angry or not, he couldn't stop the flare of desire that came with being so close to the object of his fantasies. He damned his own libido for betraying him. Just what he needed to fuck up his already messed up life, an unrequited crush on someone who obviously couldn't stand the sight of him.

"So you go running off, like some little kid in a pout fest?" Garrett cocked a brow in judgment.

"I just wanted to go out for a while. I didn't know that I'd traded one prison away for another." Owen started to shoot to his feet, only to have Garrett reach over and jerk back down.

"Relax, there's no reason to go all drama queen on me. I'm just pointing out that it's not a good idea to go out alone. Next time, ask somebody to accompany you," Garrett chided.

"And who do you suggest I ask? Andrew is Mitchell's brother, so he has a bigger target on his back than me and they sent Shane off to live with Dumb and Ass."

"Mitchell placed Shane with Jared and Kevin because your foster brother is a psychopath and they're the only ones who have any chance of reforming him. They didn't separate him

from you and Andrew as some form of punishment.”

Maybe not, but it sure felt that way to Owen. Ever since he could remember, it had always been the three of them. While they’d been raised under the brutal fist of their surrogate father, Edward, they had learned to lean on each other for support and protection. While Shane may seem mean and without emotion to others, with Owen and Andrew, he’d always been caring. Owen couldn’t count the times that Shane had stepped in and taken punishments for them. Since Edward had tended to dole out discipline that left behind permanent scars, that said a lot, too.

“You could always ask Seth to take you out,” Garrett suggested.

Owen’s gaze drifted up to the stained glass picture of the Prodigal Son again. Of course, Garrett picked up on it. “Wasn’t it a happy reunion when you came home?”

For a moment he almost told the Hawk to go fuck himself, then before Owen knew it, the words came tumbling out, “I’m not what Seth expected to find after all those years of searching for me.”

“And what’s that?”

“A mini him. Some buffed up solidier, who’s ready to join the good cause and make the world right. Instead he got somebody who’s only good at making poisons, cracking safes or infiltrating computer systems.”

Now it was Garrett whose mouth momentarily parted in shock. “Did you just say you make poisons?”

Owen pulled his coat together again as he nodded. “Yeah, kinds that specifically work on shifters. I’ve also made a couple kinds of tranquilizers, too.”

“I heard that Andrew used something like that on Vapor before they became mates. We loved ribbing him for being knocked out in the course of a mission.” A grin spread out over Garrett’s lips, making his look even hotter. “I didn’t know you made it though.”

A flush of pride rushed through Owen. “I’m still trying to tweak it a bit, so it lasts longer. Or at least I was. I had to leave a lot of my supplies behind me when we came into the coalition and it’s taking me a while to build them back up.”

“Do you think the stuff was destroyed?”

“I suppose animal control took much of it,” Owen shrugged. He could tell by the way Garrett cocked his head to the side the Hawk found the response confusing, but Owen didn’t feel like expounding on it—not when he had more pressing issues on his collection plate.

“Are you going to take me back and turn me over to Seth?” he asked, shivering again as a cold breeze blew through the building.

“Are you afraid that he’ll hurt you or something?”

"I may have when I first moved in, but not so much anymore since he's never raised a hand to me." Which had been a welcome change.

"Then what do you think he'll do?" Garrett pressured.

"Same as always, get all flustered and maybe yell a bit. Truthfully, I don't think Seth knows what to do with me period. I feel like the only reason he even puts up with me is because he thinks he has to out of some form of family obligation."

"I don't think that's true. From what I hear, he was pretty excited to have you home."

"If you say so," Owen replied, not buying it for one moment. He pulled the front of his jacket tighter again as his teeth began chattering.

Garrett frowned. "Don't you have a heavier coat?"

Owen shrugged as a heat came over his face. "Seth mentioned there being new clothes for me in the closet, but I haven't checked yet."

"Why the hell not?" Garrett demanded.

Confused, Owen slowly shook his head. Didn't Garrett get how things worked? Maybe things were different in Hawk society. "I haven't earned them yet."

"What makes you think you have to? Seth bought those for you because you need them."

"Actually I think it was Cassie who got them," Owen mumbled, referring to the only female that lived in their apartment.

"I should have known. That gal can never pass up a mall. Don't let her love of shopping fool you, though. Cassie can hold her own against any of the men in the coalition."

"I know better than to underestimate her. I've seen her when she gets mad at one of her brothers and I never want to be on the receiving end of that." Truthfully, Cassie was one of the few who Owen actually felt comfortable with.

"Then you should know better than to insult her by not wearing the stuff she bought you. I can guarantee she already thinks you've earned them, just by being you."

"That's never been good enough before, why should things change now?" Owen ducked his head as he felt a warm heat cover his cheeks.

"I'm sure Seth would believe differently."

Owen let out a humorless chuckle. "I think you're wrong on that one."

"You should hear him talk about you. I can tell he's so proud of you and happy that you're home. I know the last thing he would want is for you to freeze to death because you didn't think you were worthy enough for a new coat," Garrett said, his voice softening for the first time since he sat down.

"Maybe," Owen hedged, more to end the argument than out of belief.

"But we have bigger worries on our mind right now."

Owen jerked his head up, the ominous tone in Garrett's statement sending him into alert.
"What's that?"

"There's a group of Ravens coming. I just heard them land on the roof."

No sooner had Garrett finished that warning than the stained glass windows shattered under a barrage of gunfire.

Chapter Two

Garrett let out a snarl as he threw himself over Owen in a desperate attempt to provide some cover for the feline. To his credit, Owen didn't act overly afraid of the impending danger. The Tiger just cursed as he curled into a protective ball.

"When I tell you to, I want you to drop to the ground and start crawling for the aisle," Garrett ordered.

While he didn't relish going out into the open, Garrett knew staying put would mean certain death for both of them. Owen nodded to indicate he understood, his body trembling only slightly. Once there was a brief pause in gunfire, Garrett gave Owen a shove, "Now, move fast."

Owen immediately obeyed, dropping to his knees, and started to crawl down the length of the pew. Garrett followed, wincing when a bullet took out a hymnal over his head. Bits of cardboard, leather binding and paper rained down on him. A few stray pieces of glass had made it to the interior of the building, the jagged edges cutting into Garrett's hands. He winced in pain. Even with gloves on, he could feel numerous injuries being inflicted on his palms. He could only imagine how bad it must be for Owen, who wore no protection at all.

"Can you shift at will yet?" he called to Owen, most shifters couldn't transform into their animal forms until they were in their mid-twenties. Even after the first change, it often took years for them to control their bodies enough to shift whenever they wanted to.

When Owen shook his head, Garrett let out a moan. Of course he couldn't, that would make things too easy. He reached up to his ear and keyed up his ever-present radio. "Home base, are you there?"

"Home base, identify yourself," a smooth, voice returned. Garrett thought it may have been another Hawk shifter, but given the background noise, it was hard to recognize the speaker for sure.

"This is Garrett and I'm at the big church on Martin Luther King Boulevard. I'm with a feline shifter and we need some help. We're under attack from enemy fire." Another burst of gunshots rang out, almost as if to prove his claims.

"Copy, help is on its way. ETA ten minutes," the voice returned.

Garrett picked up speed so he could get close enough for Owen to hear him. "Headquarters is sending reinforcements, but it's going to take them ten minutes to get here."

Owen nodded, his face pale, whether from pain or fear Garrett couldn't be for sure. He glanced down and let out a hiss of displeasure when he saw the blood pooling under Owen's hands. "Can you run? If we can make it behind that altar, I think they have a baptismal pool

back there. Hopefully we can take cover in there until help arrives.”

“Yeah, I think I can make it.” Owen winced as he lifted one hand up to inspect it. “Look, why don’t you shift to your Hawk form and get the hell out of here? Don’t let me hold you back.”

Shock rendered Garrett momentarily stupid. Didn’t Owen realize a good soldier never left a buddy behind? “Would Andrew or Shane abandon you?”

“Of course not, but we’re almost family. You hardly know me, so you shouldn’t have to die because I was stupid enough to go wandering around by myself,” Owen reasoned.

Garrett crawled forward so he could reach out and grab the back of Owen’s too-thin jacket. “I’m not leaving you, so get that idea out of your blond head. Now get ready to make a break for the altar. Gunfire is going to be heavy, so be ready for it.”

Once Owen nodded, Garrett gave the feline a not-so-gentle shove. “Run!”

The Tiger could move quickly, Garrett mused as he watched Owen book down the center aisle. After a half second, Garrett followed. As predicted, their appearance brought a fresh wave of gunfire their way. While Garrett had his own guns out, he didn’t return fire, choosing to focus his energy on getting to the safety of the pool instead. He only hoped it was empty since he didn’t relish the idea of crouching in cold water until help arrived.

Just as he’d reached the first step of the altar, Owen let out a sharp yelp of pain. His steps faltered a second before he began running again, but not before Garrett saw the telltale red staining the man’s right arm. Shit, the last thing he needed was for Owen to take a bullet.

A strange wave of protectiveness slammed into Garrett and he pushed himself forward to reach Owen. He caught up to the younger man just as he reached the back of the altar. Garrett let himself feel hope for the first time when he saw the three foot deep pool lined with blue tile and blessedly empty of water.

He shoved Owen inside, hoping that all the myths about cats landing on their feet were true, before diving in after him. Garrett ended up landing on top of Owen who let out a grunt. Garrett muttered an apology before rolling off him. “How bad are you hit?” he demanded as he got his guns ready.

“They just winged me.” Owen gave a weak smile. “Pun not intended.”

“Can you shoot? We’re going to have to hold them off until backup arrives.”

Owen pulled out a Glock.

The way he handled the weapon let Garrett know the Tiger was comfortable with it.

“Of course I can. Ever since I moved in with the coalition, Seth has been making me go to the shooting range daily.”

They both got up into crouches and peered over the edge of the pool. After a couple tense moments, several figures came from the darkness and started to slowly advance down the

center of the church.

"Owen, come out. I just want to talk to you," one of the Ravens called.

All the Ravens were eerily similar in appearance. So much that all Garrett had to do was look at their pasty skin, beady eyes and greasy dark hair and he could immediately identify them. That is if their rancid, rotten meat stench didn't give them away first.

"Do you honestly think I'm going to fall for that, Marrick? I thought you knew me better?" Owen yelled back.

"An old friend of yours?" Garrett asked as he waited for the Ravens to come a little closer. While he was a good shot, he didn't want to risk missing and giving the birds the upper hand.

"I hired him for muscle on a job I had to do around a year ago," Owen explained, never taking his gaze off the enemy.

"Why not just use Andrew or Shane?"

"Because they were already out on their own assignments."

"Do I even want to know what the job was?" Garrett took aim, just a few more steps and he could finally nail the bastard.

"A Scorpion shifter had some incriminating photos and a client hired us to get them back. Since the Scorpion kept them locked up in a safe, I was the guy for the mission." Owen raised his voice again. "Hey, Marrick, I'll give you five thousand dollars if you take your buddies and leave."

"Do you have that kind of money?" Garrett hissed.

"No, but he doesn't know that," Owen muttered out of the corner of his mouth.

Even over the mocking cackles of the Ravens, Garrett would hear droplets of blood smacking onto the tile floor. While he didn't dare take his gaze off the enemy, Garrett knew that it came from Owen's wound, which meant it must be worse than he said for it had soaked through the denim of his jacket. Garrett swallowed back a wave of unwanted panic as he wondered how many minutes had passed since headquarters had assured help would be coming.

"You can't buy your way out of this one, Owen," Marrick sneered.

Those were the last words he spoke. Owen squeezed off a shot before the last syllable had left the bastard's thin lips. A bright, red wound appeared in the Raven's forehead before the back of his skull exploded. His body fell with a loud thud.

"Now that was a shame. For a Raven, he wasn't that bad. At times he could almost be funny," Owen mused, his voice still ice covered.

The Ravens let out shocks of surprise, an emotion Garrett shared. Who knew the blond punk was such a good shot? Most of the soldiers in the coalition would be hard pressed to match the skill Owen had just displayed.

“Since we used to pal around, I’m going to give you other birds one last chance to leave,” Owen offered in a cool voice.

The response came via way of more gunfire.

Owen and Garrett both took cover by ducking down. As Garrett lowered his head, his gut lurched when he saw the puddle of blood forming to one side of Owen’s feet.

“Are you sure you can’t shift?” he yelled over the noise. If Owen could turn into his Tiger form, his body would heal itself.

Owen shook his head. “I’ve only been able to do it once and that was by accident.”

Garrett winced in sympathy. An unexpected shift was always painful as hell. Some shifters had been known to go mad from the agony. There was brief pause in the Raven assault. Both he and Owen moved as one, almost as if they were so in tune to each other that words were not necessary. They rose up and returned fire. Garrett managed to take out three of the birds while Owen downed two. Unfortunately, they were still grossly outnumbered.

It did make the Ravens take cover behind the pews. They continued to exchange gunfire. The bullets took out what remained of the stain glass windows and did major damage to the pews.

“Shit, look at what they’re doing to the church. It’s never going to be the same again,” Owen mused sadly.

A pain of regret went through Garrett. While Owen wasn’t aware of it, Garrett had trailed the Tiger the past couple weeks. He knew how Owen came to the place almost nightly. It pained him to know that Owen mourned the loss of his sanctuary.

Owen swayed a bit, his free hand shooting out to hold onto the lip of the pool. His complexion had grown paler than just moments before and Garrett knew the kid was moments from passing out.

“Just stay with me, buddy. They’ll be here any minute and we can get you to the infirmary,” Garrett soothed as he silently prayed for backup to come quick.

“Seth is going to rip me a new one for this.” Owen smiled weakly. He raised his gun and fired, but this time his bullet went wide. It hit a light in the ceiling, causing sharp pieces of glass to rain down on the Ravens.

Garrett praised Owen for his marksmanship even though he knew the Tiger hadn’t mean it.

During a lull in the fighting, Garrett risked keying up headquarters again. “What’s the ETA on my backup?”

“They should be there any minute now.”

This time he recognized the voice as Daniel, the leader of the Hawks. “Thanks, boss. Can you let them know to send in medical, too?”

“Are you injured?” Daniel inquired sharply.

“Negative, it’s the feline.”

There was a long pause before Daniel came back on. “Affirmative, can you give the identity of the feline?”

Garrett gave Owen an apologetic shrug. “It’s Owen.”

“Copy, that’s what we thought. Medical has been alerted.”

“I am in so much trouble,” Owen declared. “Seth is going to tie a cow bell around my neck after this.”

“Probably,” Garrett agreed. That was if he didn’t do it first. It was obvious Owen couldn’t keep out of trouble.

“Garrett?” Owen’s voice sounded dangerously thick.

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, this isn’t the first time I’ve tangled with Ravens and I doubt it’ll be the last.”

“Not for that. I wanted to apologize ahead of time for passing out on you.”

Garrett let out a curse as he dove to catch Owen, but it was already too late. The Tiger’s eyes rolled back into his head before he face planted onto the blood-covered tiles.

Chapter Three

"I heard you fainted like some kind of Southern Belle," Andrew chirped as he came sailing into Owen's hospital room.

"Fuck off," Owen grunted as he flipped off his friend.

As always, Andrew ignored the insult. Owen curled his lip in as he took in the Jaguar's slovenly appearance. While he wore the standard black uniform, the top was untucked and wrinkled, plus the pants were covered in dry mud. His hair, which was a light brown with darker shades sprinkled throughout, was a mess. It looked like he'd been on the business end of a hair-pulling contest.

"Did you just get back from your mission or something?" Owen asked. Andrew never looked unkempt without good reason.

"Yup, and I came right over to see you." Andrew hopped into the bed.

While he had the consideration to go in on Owen's uninjured side, the jerk still jostled the bed enough to be painful. "Lucky me," Owen bit out between clenched teeth.

Andrew settled in until they were lying side by side.

Owen turned his head in order to give the annoyance a dirty look. "Somehow I don't think snuggling is on the doctor approved list of activities."

"Jacyn said you were shot," Andrew said, blowing over Owen's comment.

Jacyn was just one of Andrew's many brothers. Owen had such a hard time keeping track of them, he seriously considered making up an Excel spreadsheet. Owen scrambled his mind until he remembered that Jacyn was older than Andrew and worked as a medic both in the infirmary and out in the field. While the period of time after his fainting spell had been fuzzy, Owen seemed to recall that it had been Jacyn who had treated him at the church.

"It's just a small wound." Owen tried to shrug, only to wince at the pain the movement caused.

"That's not what Jacyn claims. He said they had to take you in to surgery to get the bullet out."

That was news to Owen since he'd just woke up seconds before Andrew had barged in. He glanced up and noted the IV bag full of saline solution going into his arm. Good, that meant they could inject the painkillers right into his veins and he could find instant relief. "Why don't you find Jacyn and tell him I need something to make me happy?" Owen suggested.

"He was on his way to get you something when I ran into him. It should only be a couple of minutes."

Andrew snuggled deeper into Owen. It had been something the three of them had been doing ever since they'd been kids and normally, Owen wouldn't have minded, but the hurt left him a bit cranky.

"Gah, you reek of Vapor," he groused as he wrinkled his nose. Truthfully, the scent didn't offend him, the slightly spicy, musky scent was actually a little appealing.

"He is my mate, so it's only natural I stink of him," Andrew replied casually.

Perhaps that's what upset Owen the most, that Andrew had moved on and found someone, while he remained alone. Almost instantly, Owen's thoughts drifted to Garrett and how nice it had felt when they were sitting so close in the pews. "Did Garrett make it out okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, from what I heard the rescue team got there right after you swooned." Andrew smirked.

"Bite me."

"I would, but Vapor might get jealous and take it out on you," Andrew teased.

That was something Owen didn't even want to contemplate. A former assassin, turned soldier, Vapor was big, with short dark hair and a cold penetrating stare. He'd always been terrified of the Panther shifter, but Andrew was just gaga over the guy.

Owen's fear must have been evident because Andrew rolled his eyes. "How many times do I have to tell you that Vapor would never hurt you? Nobody here will. Those days are long behind us now."

The old scars crisscrossing Owen's back seemed to tingle in protest. "If you say so."

Andrew propped up on one arm so he could look down at Owen. "I mean it. You're safe here. More than that, you're wanted. If you'd let go of all the shit from the past, you'd see that for yourself."

"Since when did you turn into Dr. Phil?" Aggravated, Owen tried to scoot away only to stop short as pain sliced through his arm. He tried to hold back the cry of pain, but an unmanly whimper still slipped out. A wave of nausea followed and he had to take several deep breaths to stop from puking all over Andrew.

Luckily, Jacyn came in at that moment, a full syringe in his hands. "Hey, you're awake."

Owen wanted to punch the medic for being so cheery. While he looked a lot like Andrew, Jacyn was a bit taller and thinner. He wore dark, blue scrubs and a most annoying smile. Then Jacyn came over and plunged the needle into the port and all of Owen's anger faded away as the warm wash of morphine took over.

"How much did you give me?" Owen asked, his need to gather research not thwarted by something as small as ball-crunching pain.

"Twice the recommended amount had you been in a regular hospital. While it would normally kill a human, shifters need that much for it to work. Our bodies metabolize the drug at a much faster rate. Which is good news for you, because that same DNA will help you heal quicker, too," Jacyn explained as he quickly took some vitals.

"Yeah, I know. Not only have I done my own research, but I was trained as a medic," Owen reminded him. Not that it mattered what his education level was. For some reason, the coalition had never sought out his help in the infirmary, despite the fact Owen had heard Jacyn complain about being short staffed numerous times. A pit developed in Owen's stomach as he realized they probably didn't want some two-bit thief working for them.

Jacyn had the decency to blush. "Right, I forgot about that. So you already know that your recovery time shouldn't be too long."

"It would be even faster if you shifted," Andrew pointed out.

"No thanks, I'm already in enough pain as it is," Owen mumbled as he snuggled his face into Andrew's shoulder. He allowed the familiar warmth of his friend's body to bring him a measure of comfort as he slowly drifted off. Just a few more minutes and he would be unconscious again and then the pain from his injuries and his current sucky situation could go away for a while.

"Really, Andrew, is it necessary for you to be in bed with him?" Jacyn asked, his voice a distant echo as the drug began to do its magic.

"Yes, it is. While we may not be littermates in the true sense, since the three of us grew up together, we tend to lean on each other during times like this. My being here will bring him a sense of comfort," Andrew replied.

Owen found himself giving a sloppy nod as he curled his fingers into his friend's shirt.

"What would Vapor say if he saw you tangled up with another guy like this?" Jacyn pressed.

"Vapor knows it's not sexual," Andrew assured. "Like I said, we kind of made up our own litter so to speak."

Jacyn snorted. "Yeah, Cassie is my littermate, but you don't see me spooning her."

"Okay, maybe it's more like a pack, minus the gratuitous sex," Andrew chuckled.

"Your boots are getting mud all over the sheets," Jacyn grouched.

"I'll only stay for a few minutes longer, I promise. Once he's back to sleep, I'll take off."

"Fine, but you better not let Doc Featherstone catch you or there'll be hell to pay," Jacyn grunted.

"Doc can suck it," Owen slurred before the heavy cloak of sleep came over him. His last conscious thought was of Garrett and if they would ever meet again.

* * * *

Seth sighed heavily as he stared down at his sleeping brother. Even in his slumber, Owen's face held a troubled expression, his lips slightly downturned as his brow furrowed. Seth wondered if he'd ever see Owen smile and be carefree or if his past would continue to plague him.

He yearned to reach out and smooth Owen's hair away from his brow, but he'd learned from past experience that Owen didn't welcome being touched by anyone other than Andrew or Shane. It was a situation that Seth found understandable and irritating at different turns. While he could appreciate Owen's shock at finding out he had a long-lost brother, at other times Seth didn't understand the younger man's reluctance to get close.

"What am I going to do with you?" Seth whispered as his gaze drifted to the thick bandage on Owen's arm.

Damn it, Owen could have been killed. Shit, he would have had it not been for Garrett being there. Not for the first time, Seth wondered how it was that Garrett just happened to be at the church at the same moment Owen was. While Garrett had flirted a bit with Owen that one day when he'd first come to the coalition, as far as Seth knew, that had been their only interaction.

Yet, some part of Seth suspected Garrett's motives. If there was one thing Seth didn't believe in, it was coincidences and something told him there was a story behind why Garrett had been with Owen that night.

Seth shifted back in his chair and pushed that issue to the back of his mind. There would be plenty of time to worry about Garrett later. The most important thing now was getting Owen better, both physically and mentally.

He didn't know how much time passed as he worked the problem over in his head before a soft moan alerted him that Owen was up. Seth jerked upright in his chair. "Hey, buddy, how are you feeling?"

"Hurts," Owen whispered.

"I'll get someone here," Seth soothed as he reached out to push the nurse call button.

"Sorry," Owen grunted, his face pinched from pain.

"It's no big deal, all I did was push a button."

"Not for that. I know I shouldn't have been out without permission." Owen shifted his gaze to the side, as if shamed.

Seth slowly shook his head as he wondered if they would ever get over this awkwardness around each other. "You don't have to ask permission to go anywhere. You're an adult and

free to do what you want. All I ask is that you take someone with you or at least let me know where you're going."

"Sorry," Owen repeated, his gaze still fixed in the other direction.

"It's not that I don't trust you or anything. I give that same advice to all the soldiers I work with. The coalition has a lot of enemies and it's not safe for any of us to be out without backup."

"Is Mitchell pissed at me?"

"Not at all. He knows better than anyone what bastards the Ravens can be." Once again, Seth had the urge to reach out and give Owen some comfort. He held back because he didn't want to have to see that brief flare of panic that went through his brother's eyes whenever someone tried to touch him.

While Owen had been close-mouthed about his childhood and how Edward had treated him, Seth knew it couldn't have been a happy place from some of the bits and pieces Andrew shared.

"I feel so bad about that church. The birds really tore it up," Owen persisted.

"Don't worry. Mitchell's military connections will make sure that the building is repaired." Seth paused for a moment before asking, "Why were you there in the first place?"

Owen let out a sigh as he used his good hand to scrub at his face. "You'll think it's stupid."

"No, I won't. I promise," Seth rushed out. Now that he actually had Owen talking, the last thing he wanted was a halt in the conversation.

"It's just too much sometimes," Owen finally admitted.

"What? Having to live in the middle of a military base?"

"That and having to be in a house that has so many bodies in it. I just get overwhelmed with it all. Don't get me wrong, everyone has gone out of their way to be nice to me, I'm just not used to all the attention. That's why I would take off for the church. It's always open and it's so quiet there."

"Oh, I guess that makes some sense," Seth answered, not knowing really how to respond to such a confession. "Do you want me to see if another shifter family would take you in?"

Even as he asked that question, his gut clenched in protest. Now that he finally had Owen back, the last thing Seth wanted was for him to move away. At least not until they had a chance to know each other better. Maybe they wouldn't ever be as close as the Jaguar brothers were, but Seth wanted at least some kind of civil relationship between the two of them.

"Would it be the same place that Shane's at?" Owen asked hopefully.

Although he felt as if he'd just been punched in the gut, Seth fought to keep his face free of emotion. "No, Mitchell thinks it would be best for Shane to be isolated as much as possible until he's reformed."

Owen frowned. "Oh, I see. I guess I'll just stay where I'm at then."

Gee, thanks, pal. It's nice to know that I'm your second choice. "It'll get better, Owen. I swear it to you."

"Sure, if you say so," Owen replied woodenly.

Seth had to bite back the curse word threatening to slip out. Truthfully, he didn't really know if anything would improve. While he'd been optimistic at first, as time progressed and Owen continued to keep to himself, Seth had grown more concerned. "What in the hell did Edward do to you that made you crawl into that shell?"

He didn't realize he'd spoke that question aloud until Owen's mouth dropped open in surprise. For a second, Seth almost called it back in. Then he decided to let it hang in hopes that maybe this would be the time Owen finally shared.

"Nothing, in fact he treated me better than the others. I was never locked up in the closet like Shane and Andrew were," Owen replied, his tone sounding way too rehearsed and monotone.

That finally made Seth lose his last shred of control. "Bullshit! I want you to give me the fucking truth for once. Doc Featherstone told me about the scars on your back."

Anger flared through Owen's eyes. "Whatever happened to doctor-patient confidentiality?"

"He thought I already knew about them. Crazy of him to believe that brothers would actually share that kind of information with each other."

"You're not my brother," Owen retorted, his voice raising.

"Sorry to break it to you, but the DNA tests say otherwise."

"That doesn't mean shit as far as I'm concerned. If you were truly a brother, you would have been there when I needed you." Owen clamped his lips together and turned his head away, perhaps thinking he'd revealed too much.

"Let me be there for you now," Seth nearly pleaded. "You don't know how much I regret that I wasn't able to protect you in the past. If I had known for sure that you were alive all those years..."

He broke off, unable to continue. A healthy dose of guilt hit him hard in the chest as he chastised himself for not knowing Owen had survived the mass Raven attack. Sure, he'd been a lot younger then, since it had been over twenty years ago, but Seth should have questioned the fact they'd never found Owen's body in the smoldering remains of their childhood home. At the time though, Seth had been grappling with the grief of their parents' death to be thinking clearly. That was a mistake both he and Owen paid for.

"I'm sorry I didn't find you sooner," Seth said, his voice cracking with emotion. "Don't think a day doesn't go by that I don't regret the hell out of that. Pushing me away isn't going to make things better."

Owen turned his face back and glared at Seth. "I'm sorry, but there's just some things that can't be fixed and I'm one of them. The sooner you realize that, the better off we'll both be. Now why don't you run back to Noah and let me get some sleep?"

With that stinging suggestion, Owen shifted awkwardly to his side and presented Seth with his back. Seth sat there stunned, hurt and silent for several breaths before he finally got up and walked away.

As he stormed his way through the infirmary, he had a new purpose in mind. While Owen may not be in the mood to divulge his past information, Seth knew of somebody who just may have the answers he needed. He quickly made his way to the apartment and burst through the door. It took him a few moments, but he finally found Andrew sitting at the table in the kitchen.

"I need to talk to you about Owen," Seth announced as he took the seat opposite of the Jaguar shifter.

Andrew glanced up from the laptop he'd been working on to give Seth a guarded look. "About what?"

"I need to know if you ever saw Edward hurt him."

"Of course I did. In case nobody clued you in on the fact, Edward was hardly father of the year material. Still he favored Owen in certain ways and treated him better than me or Shane."

"If that's the case, why does he have scars on his back that one would get from repeated whippings?" Seth demanded.

The shock that passed over Andrew's face was too genuine to be faked. "Are you sure of that?"

Seth nodded. "Yeah, the doc filled me in on them. They looked to be a few years old and are supposedly pretty vicious."

"Oh my God, that would make sense," Andrew turned several shades paler.

"Then please fill me in, too. I only want to help him." When Andrew still hesitated, Seth added, "Please? I'm begging you."

"When Owen started to show promise in poisons, Edward sent him away for a few months to live with an associate of his. This guy was supposed to be the best at chemical warfare, even if it was rumored he was batshit crazy."

"Do you think he may have been the one to hurt Owen?" Seth pressed.

"Now that you've mentioned the scars, I'm beginning to wonder if maybe he did. When Owen got back, he wasn't the same. He'd grown withdrawn and quiet, even with me and Shane. I'd just thought it was because he'd been upset about being sent away for a while."

"He never said anything to you?" Seth asked.

"No, but then Owen's not big on sharing stuff about himself."

If that wasn't the truth. "What's this associate's name? I want to pay him a visit."

Andrew shook his head. "His name was Greggson, but it won't do you any good now."

"Why is that?" Seth would get the bastard to confess, even if he had to beat the words out of him.

"Greggson was murdered a year ago. Until just now, I'd assumed it was due to the people he hung around with, but now I'm beginning to think differently." Andrew put a hand to his stomach as he swallowed nervously.

"What do you think happened?"

"I think Shane found out about what Greggson did to Owen."

"You think it was Shane who killed the prick?"

"Yeah, because Shane never allowed anyone, aside from Edward, to hurt me or Owen. If they did, he made sure they paid in the most painful way possible."

A shiver slid down Seth's back as he thought about the damage the little deviant could be capable of. Seth had faced plenty of scary things in his past, but not even he would want to tangle with the young Leopard shifter. The cold, deadness of the kid's eyes alone was enough to make most hardened soldiers squirm in fear.

"Good," he finally rasped out. "While I would have liked to have been able to question Greggson myself, something tells me he got what he deserved."

"Yeah, and with as protective as Shane feels over Owen, Greggson didn't go out easy either," Andrew agreed.

"My only regret is that I wasn't there to see the bastard taken down," Seth said, his heart breaking at the thought of what his brother must have gone through at the hands of Greggson.

No wonder Owen didn't want anything to do with him. It was clear that he blamed Seth for not finding him sooner. Now Seth just had to figure a way to make things right between them or else it would be Greggson who ended up winning after all.

Chapter Four

Owen sat down at his makeshift desk, so he could make some notes while the data remained fresh in his head. Once again, he cursed the fact that he didn't have a computer to keep all the information on. When he'd last inquired on how long it would be until he got one, his only answer had been a blank stare followed by a round of laughter. Granted, Owen had directed the inquiry to Carson, the resident IT guy, and the two didn't have the best of history, still he could have at least been semi-civil. Just because Owen had crashed the coalition's computer system one time didn't mean he'd do it again if he was given a measly laptop.

He let out a long sigh before he tossed down his pen and glanced around his workroom. While the area was cramped, his ancient desk competing with several large aquariums for space, at least it was the one place at HQ where he could go to get some peace and quiet. A dash of excitement went over him as his gaze locked in on his newest acquisition.

Nesting under a heat lamp was the glistening black body of an AtraxRobustus or as it was more commonly called the Sydney Funnel spider. As one of the most venomous arachnids in the world, Owen had been itching to see if he could modify the toxin to be used as a weapon. Since shifters as a rule were immune to most venoms, Owen knew he'd have to make a few adjustments to amp it up some.

This was the first time he'd been able to get his hands on this particular species. Before the felines had found their safe house and cleared it out, Owen had been close to getting one. He had dubious resources and contacts all over the map.

It had been by sheer luck that he'd been able to snag Andrew's laptop long enough to access his email and find the message from the seller willing to part with the spider. Owen had snuck out last night to meet the man. That had been a huge risk since Seth had been keeping an even closer eye on him the past two weeks, since the church incident. Plus, he'd been forced to borrow the cash from Andrew to pay for his purchase. It had been so worth it though.

A soft knock on the door brought him out of his thoughts. Owen shut his notebook before calling, "It's open."

He expected it to be Cassie since she often brought him meals. Owen tended to get distracted in his research and would forget to take breaks for such mundane things as dinner or lunch. More than once, Cassie had come down with a tray and refused to leave until she saw him eat.

The door opened and Garrett walked in.

Owen's heart did a little leap of delight. "What are you doing here?" He winced at how blunt and rude that question probably sounded.

Garrett didn't appear offended, he just slowly walked around the room and studied the various tanks.

Owen used that time to study Garrett. He had on his black uniform, a few wicked looking guns strapped to his side. While Owen had never really shot a weapon until the past few months, one of his old responsibilities had been to make sure Shane and Andrew's firearms were cleaned and ready at all times. As a result, Owen knew guns inside out, so he could appreciate all the firepower Garrett was carrying around...double entendre meant.

"I wanted to see how you're doing," Garrett explained as he bent down to examine a Diamond Back Rattlesnake. "They really have you tucked down in the pits of this place, don't they?"

"Yeah, the only open space they had used to be a storeroom for the jail. Lucky for me, I more than know my way around the cells." Owen smiled guiltily.

"Ah, but you make for such a cute, little felon." Garrett grinned as he finally looked at Owen.

For a brief second, it felt as if all the air left his chest as Owen stared back at the handsome man. Had Garrett just called him cute? Normally, Owen would have been insulted, but coming from Garrett, it seemed almost like a compliment. Owen scrambled for something clever to say, but came up blank. He'd never been good in any kind of social situation, especially ones involving someone he was attracted to. So he sat, rooted in place like some idiot, as Garrett walked over and reached out to finger the spike tips of his hair.

"You changed it to blue," Garrett observed, his body so close that Owen could have reached out to caress it, had he the guts.

"Yeah, the red was getting tired and old," Owen replied, finally finding his voice.

"It looks really good on you." Garrett's fingers lingered in Owen's hair for a few thrilling moments before the Hawk dropped his arm.

"Thanks." Owen swallowed nervously.

"How is the wound doing?"

"Better. It only hurts if I do a lot of lifting and stuff. Otherwise, it's nearly healed."

"I'm glad to hear that. You had me worried for a while." Garrett continued to study Owen, almost as if he were searching for some clue to a mystery or something.

"I'm sorry for passing out on you. I hope somebody helped you carry me out."

Garrett laughed. "I managed just fine on my own. You're not that heavy."

"Ouch, I think you just hurt my manhood there," Owen teased.

"I wouldn't worry about that." Garrett's gaze slowly traveled the length of Owen's body. "I'd say your manhood speaks for itself."

Okay, there was no mistaking that Garrett was coming onto him now. Desire flared through Owen as he licked his lips. "Yours is pretty impressive, too."

If Andrew and Shane could have heard the conversation, they'd both be slack jawed with shock at Owen's boldness. That is if they didn't laugh themselves shitless over the clichéd comments first.

Garrett moved in a bit closer, forcing Owen to tilt his head back. Owen became very aware that the Hawk's cock was only inches away. All Owen would have to do is twist a little in his chair and he could mouth Garrett's dick through the thick material of his pants. Then after he got the man good and worked up, Owen would slowly undo his fly so he could really get to work.

"What's running around in that little blond head of yours?" Garrett demanded as he reached out and lightly fingered Owen's hair again.

"Truthfully? I was fantasizing about how great it would be to suck you off right here and now," Owen stunned himself by admitting. He couldn't help it though. There was something about Garrett that made Owen just want to throw away all his constraints and grab onto life for once.

"I may just let you do that, too." Garrett curled his fingers in Owen's hair and tugged, forcing his head further back. "I want you to know ahead of time, I'm not looking for any commitments. Not to be a dick or anything, but I'm not the type to take a mate."

Which was just perfect because Owen didn't see himself settling down either. With Edward and now Seth bossing him around, the last thing he wanted was someone else trying to control his life. He gave a smile he hoped came off as wanton and wicked. "Good, because I'm not looking to get hitched. All I want is a good, hard fuck to take some of the edge off." Owen reached out for Garrett's pants, only to have his hands batted away.

"Not yet," Garrett admonished as he let go of Owen's hair and stepped back.

Confused, Owen cocked a brow. "If you're worried about not having lube, don't worry. I always make sure to have some tucked away. Just in case I get an opportunity."

"Nice. You carry lube, but don't have the common sense to wear a decent coat when going outside during the winter. It's good to see you have your priorities straight."

"So, does that mean we can fuck now?" Owen asked, palming his own hard cock through his jeans.

"Yes, tonight after I take you out."

Now thoroughly confused, Owen tilted his head to the side. "Just a hint, you don't need to treat me to dinner and a movie in order to get into my pants. I'm such a slut, I usually give it

up for free.”

The corner of Garrett’s mouth kicked up into a grin. “That may be true, but I know how itchy you can get when confined and I thought you’d like to leave this behind for a couple of hours.”

The prospect of getting out excited Owen so much he almost bounced in his seat, like some kind of jacked up idiot. “Are you kidding? I would love it. How soon before we can leave?”

“Give me a couple of hours to go back to my place and clean up. I’ll pick you up at two. We can make a day of it.”

“So, we can meet back here?” Owen asked, hopeful. He didn’t want to subject Garrett to the chaos that was his new home. Knowing his luck the Jaguar brothers, Seth and Cassie would all want to interrogate Garrett on his intentions.

“Get that look of panic off your face. I’ll pick you up at your apartment and it’ll be okay. Your family doesn’t scare me.” Garrett chuckled.

It struck Owen how Garrett had referred to the mad bunch as his family. Funny, since not even Owen believed that on most days. Usually he just felt like a nuisance that they’d taken in because of some twisted sense of obligation. “Are you sure? I could just meet you out front or something,” Owen offered, hoping to hell that Garrett would agree.

“No, after what happened last time, I think they would be more comfortable if they knew you were going out with some backup.” Garrett leaned down and pressed an all-too-brief kiss to Owen’s lips. “Relax, it’ll be okay. It’s not like I’m coming to them and asking for your hand in marriage or anything.”

“Of course not, because you and I aren’t looking for that kind of commitment,” Owen replied absently, his lips still tingling from the kiss.

He wanted to reach up and pull Garrett down for another one, this time with some tongue action involved. Before Owen had a chance to act on that desire, Garrett started to backtrack to the door.

“Make sure you wear something decent. By that I mean warm, yet easy to take off,” Garrett ordered.

“Are you going to tell me where we’re going? That may make it easier for me to decide what outfit to put on,” Owen teased.

“That’s a surprise. Just make sure to wear a heavy coat.”

Garrett gave him a small wave before leaving. For the longest time, Owen sat there and replayed the conversation in his head. He turned to the funnel spider and asked, “Did you hear that? He actually wants me.”

Owen paused as he realized he'd started to engage his specimens into actual conversations. Great, he was just one step above a wacky cat lady. Next he'd be running out in front of HQ and shrieking at the neighborhood kids for walking on the lawn.

Damn, it was a good thing Garrett was getting him out for a while because Owen had obviously started to go a little cabin crazy.

A couple hours later Owen doubted his sanity even more as he rushed around his bedroom, trying to decide what to wear.

"It's about time you wore the clothes I bought you," Cassie said from the bed which she'd sat on to watch the show.

She looked a lot like her way-too-numerous-to-keep-track-of Jaguar brothers, her hair and eyes identical in color to them. She had her locks pulled back into a loose ponytail and wore an overly large Red Wings jersey. While she may be tiny in build, Owen knew it would be a mistake to underestimate her, since he'd seen her fight. She could take down most of the males in the coalition. Plus, she ran the massive household with an iron hand. Even Mitchell often gave into her demands.

"Seth told me that if I didn't, he'd kick my ass," Owen said as he pulled two shirts out of his closet and held them up for Cassie's opinion.

She pointed to the blue, button up one. "You know he really wouldn't hit you, right?"

"No, he just gives me that look of disappointment. Believe me, that's ten times worse. Should I do jeans or go for something dressier?"

"Seth isn't disappointed in you and I would go with jeans. Garrett strikes me as a casual kind of date."

"It's not a date and I'm probably the biggest letdown in Seth's life," Owen declared. He started to fumble with the tie to his sweats and paused as he realized that he probably shouldn't strip in front of Cassie.

She gave a half-shrug and made no move to leave. "Please, like you have something that I already haven't seen before."

Owen still hesitated for a beat before he finally shrugged. She did have a point and it wasn't like he'd ever make a move on her. While most male felines were bisexual by nature, he'd never found woman appealing. Plus, Owen had heard through the coalition gossip mill that Cassie was involved with a love-hate relationship with the leader of the local wolf pack.

"How do you know that it won't be more impressive though?" Owen teased.

Cassie rolled her eyes. "I promise to avert my gaze so I won't get tempted by your awesomeness."

Owen waited until she turned her head before quickly changing. He'd taken a shower an hour ago, so all he had left to do was style his hair and he'd be set. Once he was clothed, he held his hands out to the sides. "What do you think?"

Cassie glanced back his way. "If it's not a date, then why do you care?"

"Has anyone told you what a smartass you are?"

She smirked. "Yes, my brothers inform me of that daily. Then I kick their asses in order to teach them some respect. Lucky you get a pass though, since you're still injured. Besides, I wouldn't want you showing up for your date with that pretty face all bruised up."

Owen ducked into the bathroom and grabbed the spiking glue. "Who's home right now besides us?" He prayed that most of the household would be off on various missions. Cassie came up behind him and leaned against the doorframe.

"Just you, me, Daniel, Brent and Seth."

"Great, Seth would have to be here," he groaned.

"Don't worry, he won't give you any hassle over leaving HQ so long as you have Garrett with you. It's okay to leave the premises, you know."

"Yeah, Seth did tell me that while I was in the infirmary."

"I wonder where Garrett's going to be taking you?"

"Hopefully back to his bed so we can go at it like a pair of horny bunnies," Owen shot back as he used his fingers to work the spiking glue through his hair. He'd have liked to change the color of his tips, but there wasn't enough time.

Cassie slowly shook her head at him. "You are such a tramp."

"Not lately, but hopefully that will change today," Owen returned. He finished styling his hair, turned off the light and brushed past Cassie. A quick glance at the clock told him he only had a few minutes before Garrett would be there. "Have you seen my tennis shoes?"

"You mean the ones that were full of holes and covered in blood?" Cassie crossed her arms over her chest. "I tossed them in the garbage while you were in the shower."

The doorbell rang and Owen cursed. "Shit, he's early."

Cassie tossed him the new pair of Chucks she'd purchased for him. Owen decided he really liked the bright red color of them. "Thanks, you have great taste."

"I know." She pushed past him and ran down the stairs.

He followed, frowning when he spotted Seth loitering at the bottom of the steps.

"Are you going somewhere tonight?" Seth asked, his gaze narrowing.

"Yeah, I'm going to hang out with Garrett for a while," Owen replied as sat down to put his shoes on.

"When are you coming back? I thought tonight would be a good time to start your transformation training before you shift again."

Yeah, because that sounded like a lot of fun. Owen heard that the training had required a lot of meditation and getting in touch with one's self. Yawn! While he realized he'd have to endure it eventually, since he didn't want his next shift to hurt like hell, Owen had never been one for sitting still when there was always so much work to be done. "I don't know when I'll be home."

"Where are you guys planning on going?" Seth continued to grill.

Owen decided his brother would make a great interrogator for the government's terrorist unit. No need for water boarding when they could just use a nagging Tiger shifter. Owen didn't look up from his lacing. "I don't know, he didn't say."

A muffled conversation began in the foyer.

Owen strained his ears in hope of picking it up. He wondered who'd answered the door and if they were giving Garrett a hard time.

"I wouldn't worry too much. Garrett is one of Daniel's best soldiers," Cassie butted in.

"If it were only battle tactics that Garrett wanted to share with Owen, then I wouldn't be so worried," Seth countered.

Since Owen realized that Seth was only trying to make peace by offering to help with his training, he decided to reach out some, too. "Why don't we schedule a training session for tomorrow night?"

"Are you sure? If you want, I could get someone else to mentor you."

"No, I want it to be you."

Seth studied him for a few moments before a slow grin spread over his face. "Thanks, that means a lot."

A heat came over Owen's face. Because of the way he'd grown up, it still unsettled him a bit to know that someone could actually give a damn. "I better get going. Don't want to be late for my date with the bird."

He got up and started to walk away when Seth grabbed him by the shoulder to stay him. "There's something you should know about Garrett. While he's a nice enough guy, it wouldn't be a good idea to get too attached to him."

"I know, he doesn't do relationships." Owen shrugged. "That's okay because I don't either."

Chapter Five

As soon as the door opened and Garrett found himself facing Daniel, he knew things were about to get a little sticky. He and the normally pretty easy-going Hawk leader had clashed a few times in the past, usually over operations. That still hadn't stopped him from promoting Garrett several times in the past year. Even with their differences, Daniel couldn't deny that once Garrett set his mind on something, it got done, be it completing a successful mission or training until he was the highest skilled soldier in their ranks.

Daniel narrowed his eyes and said, "If you're here to bitch about me putting Kip under your command, you can save it."

"Actually, I'm here for Owen," Garrett explained.

"I should have known," Daniel sighed as he stood aside to let Garrett in.

Garrett didn't even want to know what that comment meant. He just walked inside and shoved his hands in the pockets of his coat. He'd never been inside the apartment and couldn't help but be impressed by how large, yet warmly decorated it was. Much like the rest of headquarters, the walls were all earth tones that contrasted nicely with the wood floors. Unlike the rest of the building, however, the dwelling had a lived in, homey feel to it.

"Do I even want to know what kind of plans you have?" Daniel demanded as he shut the door, then crossed his arms over his chest.

"Nothing that he hasn't already agreed to," Garrett replied in cool, clipped tones.

"Damn it," Daniel cursed as he ran a hand through his dark hair.

"It's no big deal and I'm off the clock? So I don't see how that concerns you," Garrett challenged. While he respected his leader, that didn't mean he'd back off.

"Bullshit. The kid lives in the same house as me and he's already screwed up enough without you adding to it."

"We're just going to have some fun. If it weren't me, then it'd be some other guy. Someone as good looking as Owen can't help but draw attention."

"Fine, then let it be someone else. Just so long as it isn't one of my Hawks," Daniel seethed. "Besides, I thought you said you couldn't stand felines. Why are you sniffing after one all of the sudden?"

Garrett shrugged an indifference he really didn't feel. "He's just a passing interest, nothing more."

"Really?" Daniel cocked his head to the side. "Then how was it you just so happened to be with him at that church?"

That question hit Garrett like a kick to the ass, but damned if he'd let on to Daniel. Instead, Garrett gave a lazy grin. "Just a coincidence. I was out patrolling and saw him tripping around the city all by his little self."

No way in hell he'd admit that he'd been actively trailing Owen for days. Not only would that make him look like some sort of psycho stalker, but if pressed for a reason why, Garrett wouldn't be able to answer. He didn't know why he'd been drawn to the Tiger, any more than he could figure out why he had this strange protectiveness when it came to the feline.

Daniel slowly shook his head. "I've never believed in coincidences and I don't think you do either. There's more to this story than you're telling me."

"Honest, boss, it's just two guys going out to help each other scratch an itch." And Garrett planned on scratching Owen all night long, too.

"You just better make sure he comes home in one piece or you'll have me to answer to."

As if on cue, Seth walked in, the Tiger's face an angry mask.

"Great," Garrett drawled. "Because Owen doesn't already have enough protectors as it is."

Owen came into the foyer and all of Garrett's irritation vanished. The feline looked so damn sexy in his tight jeans with his hair spiked in a messy style and a half-smile playing on his lips. Lust rode over Garrett as he imagined all the good ways he could put that mouth to use.

"Ready?" Owen grinned big enough for a dimple to appear on one cheek.

Shit, he just keeps getting better looking. I'll be lucky if I don't fuck him the instant we reach the car. "Yeah," Garrett replied, his mouth watering at the thought of getting his lips all over Owen.

"Don't forget this," Cassie called as she came rushing over with a heavy, black leather coat in her hands.

She handed it to Owen who slid it on, the leather molding perfectly to his body. Garrett noticed that Owen also wore a new pair of shoes. He wondered how they'd finally convinced the stubborn feline that he deserved the new clothing.

Cassie shoved something in Owen's hand which he accepted with a blush and mumbled thanks. It took Garrett a moment to realize it was cash. It struck him as odd that Owen didn't have his own resources.

Owen turned back to Garrett. "Okay, now I'm really ready."

They said goodbye and left. On the way through the building, they got a few curious stares, but Owen either didn't notice or care. If anything, his mood seemed to improve with each step they took.

"So where are you taking me?" Owen finally asked, that dimple making an appearance again.

“Frankenmuth,” Garrett replied, smiling back.

“Franken-huh?”

“You can’t tell me you haven’t heard of the place. I thought you’ve lived in Michigan your entire life?”

Owen blushed again. “I didn’t get out much as a kid, remember?”

“Sorry.” Garrett reached over and gave Owen a light tap in the shoulder. “It’s a town about twenty minutes from here. All the stores and restaurants are German themed, you’ll love it.”

“I don’t know—lederhosen have never been my kink.” Owen cocked a brow.

“Trust me, you’ll love it and the food’s great. If you’re good, I may even buy you a bag of saltwater taffy.”

Owen’s eyes lit up. “As in candy? Well, then what are we waiting for?”

He grabbed Garrett by the hand and nearly dragged him outside, only to pause on the loading dock. “Oops, I don’t know which car is yours. You do have one, don’t you? Unless you just fly everywhere.”

“I have a car, smartass.” Garrett pointed to a classic black 1968 GTO. He hadn’t thought it possible, but Owen got more excited, nearly to the point of bouncing on his feet.

“Are you frigging kidding me? I’ve always wanted to ride in one of these things.” Owen ran over to the front of the vehicle and hovered his hands over the hood, like he wanted to touch it, but didn’t want to without permission.

Garrett nodded. “Go ahead.”

“Sweet,” Owen breathed in awe as he slowly ran his palms over the car.

The look of pure bliss on Owen’s face had Garrett’s cock swelling in response. He’d of given anything to be that damn GTO right then. “I didn’t know you were into cars.”

“I know, it’s kind of stupid really since I don’t even know how to drive.”

Garrett blinked a few times in surprise. “You never learned how?”

Owen gave another one of his frequent shrugs. “Edward always wanted me to focus on other things.”

“What, how to break into coalition computer systems?” Garrett teased as he went over and unlocked the passenger side.

“That and some other things.” Owen trailed his hands up the car until he was only inches from Garrett. “Most of the stuff would get me into even more trouble if I still used them. About the only legal thing Edward had me train for is my paramedic’s license.”

Garrett reached out and brushed the back of his knuckles against Owen’s cheek. “So how come you’re not working in the infirmary and going out with teams on missions? Jacyn is a medic and he does both those?”

A rueful smile passed over Owen's lips. "They don't even allow me to touch a computer let alone treat the wounded."

"Why? Do they think you'll mess up or something?"

"No, they don't trust me. I guess I deserve it after what I did."

Anger sliced through Garrett as he thought of how those restrictions must have feel for Owen. No wonder he held others at bay so much. Wanting to erase some of the hurt he saw lingering in Owen's gaze, Garrett leaned down and lightly pressed their lips together.

"Why don't we skip dinner and just go to your place instead," Owen suggested, his voice thick with passion.

While it sounded damn tempting, Garrett shook his head. "No, it's about time you got to have some fun. That doesn't mean I won't be taking you home with me after we're done eating though."

"I can hardly wait." Owen reached down and lightly cupped Garrett's cock.

Despite his boldness, Garrett didn't miss the flush that spread over Owen's cheeks. Garrett would bet that it had nothing to do with the cold either. Although he strove hard to cover it, Garrett could tell Owen had a shy streak in him. A wicked part of Garrett hoped that a bit of that timid trait carried over into the bed. While he preferred his lovers to be experienced, Garrett still liked to be the one in charge.

The mere thought of pinning Owen under him so he could take and dominate the younger man, had Garrett growling with need. Grabbing Owen by the front of his coat, Garrett crushed their mouths together.

Owen moaned, his mouth parting to let Garrett's probing tongue in. The sweet, exotic taste that Garrett encountered sent another hard wave of desire through him. While he could have gone on kissing Owen all day long, Garrett reluctantly broke away. "We better get going."

He opened the door for Owen, then went around and got in behind the wheel. Owen buckled up before running a finger over the dash. "I still can't believe I'm in one of these."

It pleased Garrett to know that he'd found someone who could appreciate cars as much as he did. "It's too bad I didn't know that a while ago. Flint just had a classic car show. Or else we could have driven down to the Woodward Dream Cruise."

"That would have been so cool. I read about it in the paper a couple of years ago and ever since, I've wanted to go ."

Garrett pulled out of the large parking lot, waving to the feline stationed in the guard booth. They were silent for a few moments before Owen asked, "Do you have any family?"

"I have an older sister named, Shannon and then there's my younger brother, Drew."

“Do they live around here?”

“Yeah, Drew serves under Daniel and we’re usually on the same team. Shannon and her mate live in Grand Blanc.” Garrett turned onto the freeway before cranking the heat on high. While he loved his car, it sometimes took forever for it to warm up.

“Are your parents still alive?”

“My mom is. She has an apartment here in Flint. My dad died during the Raven-Hawk conflict.” As always, a lump formed in his throat as spoke of his father.

“I’m sorry,” Owen offered in a soft voice.

“I was pretty young when it happened.”

“Both my parents were murdered by Ravens the night I disappeared. I was just a baby then, so I don’t remember it.”

“How long were you with Edward?”

“I can’t remember a time before him. The same goes for Shane and Andrew. It seems like we’ve always been together. Seth told me that Edward kidnapped the three of us when we were still very young. I guess Edward wanted to start our training early.”

Garrett gripped the steering wheel tightly as he thought about how demented Edward must have been. From the sounds of it, the only reason he’d wanted the three felines was so he could mold them into the perfect gang of thieves. “I have a question. What would Edward do if you displeased him?”

Owen started to nibble on his thumbnail. “It was never a good idea to tick him off. I didn’t have it nearly as bad as Shane or Andrew did though. Once Edward decided I would be the brain of the operations, he sent me away a lot to various mentors.”

“And how about these mentors? Where they good to you?” Garrett saw his answer when a flare of shame and hurt went through Owen’s blue-eyed gaze.

“Some were nicer than others. Most of the time I only stayed with them for a week or so. There was only one time that I was away for longer.”

“When was that?” Garrett pressed, wondering why the answer was so damn important to him.

“A few years ago. His name was Greggson and he was the top expert at poisons and toxins.” Owen continued to work his nail.

“Was?”

Owen gave a shy smile. “I’m better now than he ever was. Besides, he was killed a while ago.”

“You don’t seem too broken up over it.” Not that Garrett believed Owen capable of cold-blooded murder, it just seemed that Owen should at least feel something about his former teacher’s passing.

“Some people deserve what they get,” Owen explained in a small voice as he turned his head to look out the window.

“Why? What sin did he commit that was so bad it deserved death?” Garrett’s heart beat wildly as he realized that any answer he received to that wouldn’t be good. Something horrible must have happened to Owen and that thought bothered Garrett way more than it should have.

“He wasn’t a very nice man and he got worse when he started sampling some of his own product.”

“You mean he consumed poison?”

“Greggson also manufactured drugs in order to finance his operation. He wasn’t a shifter, so he felt every bit of the high that comes with meth.”

“My God, why would Edward leave you with someone like that?” At that moment, Garrett wished Edward was alive again, just so he could slowly strangle the man.

“Because he wanted me to be the perfect, little weapon. It worked, too, because Andrew, Shane and I are, all in our own ways, a killing machine.”

Chapter Six

Owen let out a small laugh when Garrett pulled in front of a massive red and white building. Surrounding it were so many overly large wood candles, choirboys, bells, trees and reindeer that it reminded Owen of one of their old next-door neighbor's yard, but on a much larger scale. Miss Mills had always covered her house with lights, plastic deer and a mechanical Santa. Usually, it was the only clue Owen ever got as a kid that the holidays were approaching. "This is a restaurant?" Owen asked as Garrett parked the car.

"No, I thought you'd like to see this place first."

"Why?" Owen didn't bother to keep the doubt from his voice as he peered through the windshield at a particularly huge rendition of Santa.

"Trust me. You'll get a kick out of it. It's supposedly the world's biggest Christmas store."

"Biggest," Owen echoed. "It looked like Christmas puked all over this joint."

"Stop being a Grinch and get out of the car." Garrett leaned over and gave Owen a quick peck on the cheek.

"What's a Grinch?" Owen's brain scrambled for a meaning, wondering if that was a new slang term or something.

Garrett gaped at him. "You never watched *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*?"

Once again, Owen became painfully aware of how different and totally stupid he was when it came to anything outside of his lab. "I don't get what the big deal is? Isn't Christmas over a month away?"

"True, but it's never too early to start celebrating." Garrett reached over and undid Owen's seatbelt. "Besides, this place is open three hundred and sixty days of the year."

Owen took in the vast array of colored lights. "Their electric bill must be hell."

Garrett laughed. "I like your sense of humor."

Shocked at the unexpected compliment, Owen paused, fingers on the door handle as he waited for a backhanded slam to follow. When nothing came, he turned back to Garrett. "Hopefully that's not all you like about me."

"No, there's plenty more."

While Owen yearned to know what those things were, he'd never been one to fish for praise. Finally, he muttered, "Thanks."

They got out of the car and started to cross the large parking, the sounds of holiday music drifting from the building. The air carried the heavy scents of cinnamon and pine, tickling Owen's nose. Sometimes it sucked to have heightened shifter senses and this was one of them. Humans milled all around them, happily oblivious to all of life's dangers. Owen on the

other hand, always made sure to keep an eye on the sky. After the attack at the church, he never wanted to be caught unsuspecting again.

Meanwhile echoes of Edward's numerous lectures went through Owen's head. Never let them strike first. Don't trust humans, they are the worst animals of all. Never put any faith in other shifters. If you do, they'll never hesitate to rip your throat out.

Of course Owen now realized that not all of Edward's teachings had been true. Half-shifter and half-human, Edward had been trapped between both worlds and very bitter about it. As a result, he'd passed down that hatred to his three wards. It had only been recently that any of them had trusted Mitchell and the rest of the coalition. Sometimes Owen still struggled with it and he wondered if the others did, too.

He jumped and almost cried out in alarm when he felt an arm go around his shoulder. It wasn't until the now familiar wild scent of Garrett filled his nose that Owen's heart slowed down.

"It's okay, I have your back covered," Garrett's soft voice soothed in Owen's ear.

A warmth spread over Owen's cheeks. Damn it, not again. It seemed liked all he did was blush like some shy virgin. "Sorry, I'm just not used to being out like this during the day."

"Just at night and only in churches," Garrett quipped as he smoothed his palm over the upper part of Owen's arm.

Even through his thick coat, Owen could still feel the warmth of Garrett's touch and it served to calm him even more.

They walked inside the double set of wooden doors. Guarding the entrance were a pair of ten-foot tall nutcracker statues. Owen immediately felt overwhelmed by the visual and auditory assault. Several moving displays surrounded him, various noises and songs emitting from each one. One was a train, complete with a caboose and stood four-feet tall and another was an all penguin rock band. A huge snow globe took up the center of the entryway. The contraption so tall that Owen had to crane his neck to see the top of it.

All around him were dozens of fully decorated, tall, artificial trees, some of which weren't even green. He spotted several that were all white and even a bright pink one. The place resembled a maze, winding paths going throughout the entire interior. It seemed as if every available inch was put to use. Not only were there large figurines situated on high shelves, but wall after wall were packed with brightly colored ornaments.

"Wow," Owen breathed as his gaze darted all over, trying to take everything in.

"Is it too much for you?" Garrett asked cautiously.

Owen smiled as excitement pooled in his stomach. "Yes, and I love it."

He grabbed Garrett's hand and started to drag him through the store. There seemed to be so much to see...to touch and Owen couldn't get to it all fast enough. "Oh my God, look at

this. They actually have bulbs that are painted like cat faces.”

Garrett laughed. “Your family should do their entire tree in them this year.”

Owen started, it had never occurred to him that Seth and the others might actually celebrate the holidays. “Do you think they get into decorating?”

“Why not?” Garrett brushed his fingers along Owen’s cheek. It was something the Hawk seemed to like doing and Owen didn’t mind being the recipient of it at all. Normally, Owen couldn’t stand to be touched by others, but he’d quickly discovered the same didn’t hold true with Garrett. Just the opposite, it took all Owen could do not to turn into the caress.

“I thought it was just a human thing.” Owen allowed his gaze to settle on the bulb again. Painted against a white background, the cat had green eyes and black patches.

Garrett reached around him and grabbed the bulb. Taking it from the hook, he pressed it into Owen’s palm. Very softly, Garrett closed his fingers over Owen’s hand until the ornament was firmly in his grasp. “The holidays are for everyone.”

Owen shook his head as he stared down at the cat face. “That’s not true. At least not for me.”

“Maybe it would be if you’d only give Seth the chance to know you better.”

Unshed tears blurred Owen’s vision. Damn it, I will not break down and cry in front of Garrett. I haven’t wept since I was a kid and I’m not about to start up again now. “What if Seth finds out I’m not the brother he’s always expected?”

“I don’t see how you can possibly disappoint him. I hardly know you and I can already see what a great person you are.” Garrett lightly brushed his lips against Owen’s temple before walking away.

As Owen continued to stare down at his hand, he wondered if Garrett had a point. Maybe it didn’t matter to Seth that Owen used to be a criminal. Owen’s gaze fixated on the back of his knuckles and the light dusting of scars on his skin. He’d earned those when Greggson had used a willow branch on his hand whenever he’d made a mistake in his lessons.

Did he dare put himself out and risk being treated the same way again? While Seth had never raised a hand to him before, that didn’t mean things wouldn’t change if Owen fucked up. Owen wasn’t a scared kid anymore, he’d fight back if someone attacked him, but he felt pretty sure he’d come out the loser if he took Seth on.

Then where would that leave him? Would they throw him out of the coalition? He’d already been separated from Shane. If they took Andrew away from him, too, Owen knew he’d lose it. Andrew was the only thing that had remained steady in his life. Sure, they hardly saw each other anymore now that Andrew had found a mate and a job in the coalition, but at least Owen knew he was around if needed.

Things couldn't stay the same between him and Seth though. At the rate they were going, one of them was bound to blow up sooner or later. Owen swallowed hard as he realized he'd have to take Garrett's advice and trust his brother to accept him. Because the other option would only lead to heartbreak.

* * * *

Garrett opened the front door of his apartment and ushered Owen inside. "It's not as big as your place, but I don't spend much time here." Owen's impassive gaze swept the interior, revealing nothing to Garrett.

Finally a hint of a smile appeared on the Tiger's lips. "This isn't bad at all. You should have seen some of the shit holes we used to live in."

"That bad, huh?" Garrett asked as he shut the door. He watched, hunger burning his gut as Owen moved slowly around the sparsely furnished apartment. While clean, Garrett realized the place had a cold, clinical feel to it. Or at least that's what the last guy he took home told him.

"Yeah, but I don't want to talk about my past right now." Owen stopped moving as he locked gazes with Garrett.

Need pounded through Garrett as he caught the unmistakable scent of desire rolling off Owen. The smell was wild, erotic and totally feline. While it would have turned Garrett off in the past, now he wanted to rub against Owen until they were both drenched in it. "What do you want to do?" Garrett asked, his voice thick with need.

By way of response, Owen slowly slid his coat off and let it fall to the floor. Next, he carefully unbuttoned his shirt, his gaze never leaving Garrett.

"Let's not be coy, Hawk. We both know what I'm here for." Owen finally got his shirt undone. He let that drop to the floor as well.

Most felines were muscular while being thin and Owen was no different. Despite spending most of his time in the lab, he still had a build that rivaled any shifter Garrett had been with. His gaze raked over Owen's taunt pecs, to his tight abdomen before settling on the huge bulge pressing against his jeans.

Owen held his hands to the side. "So, are we going to do this or what?"

Like anyone in their right fucking mind would give a negative answer to that one. Garrett lost his own coat and shirt before advancing on Owen. As soon as he got close enough, Garrett cupped the back of Owen's head and brought him in for a deep, hard, all-consuming kiss.

A groan rumbled past Owen's lips as he opened his mouth under Garrett's assault. Garrett let out a low moan of his own as he delved his tongue inside, tasting the taffy that Owen had

consumed after dinner. Underneath it, lingered the alluring flavor that marked Owen as feline.

Owen's hands crept around to cup Garrett's ass, the younger man's fingers digging in almost painfully. Garrett could sense the growing urgency and need building up in his soon-to-be lover. Then Owen let out a noise that could only be called frustrated as he ground against Garrett.

"How long has it been for you?" Garrett asked as he tore his lips away from Owen.

The Tiger's eyes were glazed with passion and his breaths came out hard and raspy. "A while and that time was just a quickie in the back of an alley."

For some odd reason, that naughty declaration drove up Garrett's need to take Owen. Garrett growled low in his throat as he captured Owen's mouth in another brutal kiss. Owen returned the passion, one hand traveling to Garrett's cock.

Owen gave him several soft squeezes before asking, "Can I suck you off?"

Yet another request Garrett would have to be crazy to deny. He nodded, his heart hammering in anticipation as Owen dropped to his knees so his kiss-swollen lips were level with Garrett's dick. Owen carefully unzipped Garrett's pants and slowly lowered his jeans and underwear.

"I knew you'd have a beautiful cock," Owen praised as he ran a finger up Garrett's shaft.

Before Garrett could thank him for the compliment, Owen parted his lips and took in the entire length of his dick. Garrett gasped, both in shock and arousal.

There was no better way to put it—Owen was good at sucking cock. The way his opened up to take in every inch. How he used one hand to squeeze Garrett's balls. Even the way he hummed softly around Garrett's hardness. All of it made Garrett's knees almost give out under the sheer pleasure.

Several times Owen would gaze up from under his lashes. His blue-eyed gaze seeming to ask, Am I doing okay? Does this please you?

The small bit of submissiveness coming from the normally stubborn man had Garrett nearly mad with the need to totally claim the feline. He grabbed a fistful of Owen's hair and tugged hard.

For a moment, Garrett worried that he may have pushed things hard, then he saw the unmistakable flare of desire pass through Owen's eyes. Oh yeah, his Tiger liked things a bit rough. Garrett gave a savage chuckle as he shoved Owen back and away from him.

Owen twisted his body so he could catch himself by his hands, but not before Garrett spotted the wicked grin playing on his lips. Owen let out a small sound of mock distress as he started to crawl away, but Garrett moved quicker. He placed one hand between Owen's shoulder blades to trap him while reaching under with the other hand to undo the Tiger's jeans.

"Do you know what I'm going to do to you?" Garrett asked as he roughly pulled Owen's pants down so his sweet ass was exposed.

"I have a pretty good idea," Owen rasped as he curled his fingers into the tan carpet.

"I'm going to fuck you so hard that you'll be begging me to let you come." Garrett dipped his head down and slowly licked Owen's crack.

"Damn, I hope so," Owen moaned as he thrust back against Garrett's face.

Garrett slid his tongue deeper, seeking out Owen's hole. As soon as he licked the rim of the tight opening, Owen jerked with a loud gasp, "What are you doing?"

He gave one of Owen's rounded cheeks a love bite. "Getting to know every inch of you."

"But why don't you just—"

Owen's question broke off when Garrett speared the tip of his tongue into the man's hole. A sharp cry of passion ripped from Owen as his fingers clawed deeper into the carpet. Garrett thrust his tongue inside again, eliciting another yell from Owen, the sound echoing in the room.

"You were saying?" Garrett goaded as he gave Owen's flesh another bite.

"Nothing." Owen frantically shook his head, his emphatic reaction making Garrett chuckle. "Just don't stop."

Garrett got back to work, savoring each gasp and moan he earned from Owen. While Owen wasn't overly loud, he didn't hold back either. Owen even began to thrust back some, his movements a bit awkward. Garrett realized that was due to the way his pants were still around his thighs.

"Kick off your shoes," Garrett ordered.

As soon as Owen obeyed, Garrett finished stripping the man. His own pants were still halfway on, but that didn't concern Garrett at the moment. All that mattered was Owen. Garrett returned his attention to the man's hole, this time thrusting in a finger at the same moment he bit Owen's flesh again, hard enough to leave behind a mark.

"Ah, fuck!" Owen yelled loud enough for the neighbors to hear.

Luckily for Garrett, he had shifters living on both sides of him and they knew enough to mind their own business. He bit Owen again, the desire to somehow leave his mark all over the Tiger overwhelming. At the same time, Garrett began to saw his finger in and out, getting Owen stretched. Since he'd admitted it'd been a while, Garrett didn't want to rush things and hurt Owen. The only pain he wanted the shifter to feel was the good kind.

Garrett's cock throbbed as it begged for some attention, but he ignored it. Soon enough he'd be buried balls deep in Owen's ass and only then would he allow himself some pleasure of his own. Garrett added another finger, curling them so they brushed against Owen's sweet spot.

While Garrett would have preferred lube, it was in his bedroom and he didn't want to leave long enough to retrieve it. So instead, he relied on his spit. He continued to work his fingers in and out, occasionally adding another nip to Owen's skin. Each time, Garrett made sure his teeth never broke the flesh. Already Owen had several red, crescent shaped marks branding his ass.

"I need you inside me," Owen panted.

"I am inside you," Garrett replied, deliberately misunderstanding Owen's plea.

"Not your fingers. I need your cock."

Garrett sank his teeth in one last time before he pulled his fingers out. Spitting on his hand, he slicked up his aching cock before commanding, "Get on your hands and knees."

Owen scrambled to obey, showing a cooperative side that he'd never display under other circumstances. A soft rumbling sound filled the air and it took Garrett a few moments to realize it came from Owen. "Are you purring?"

"Kind of." Owen glanced over his shoulder. "Does that bother you?"

Surprisingly enough it didn't. While Garrett had never found anything about felines attractive before, he discovered that didn't hold true with Owen. He even found the way Owen often tilted his head to the side, in a completely feline manner, a turn on, Garrett ran a finger along Owen's sweat-slicked spine. "No, I think it's damn sexy."

He frowned as he noted several deep, thin scars crossing Owen's back. He lightly traced one. "Let me guess, Greggson gave these to you?"

"I don't want to talk about that now. I just need you to fuck me." When Garrett still hesitated, Owen let out a frustrated whimper. "Now, please."

While Garrett felt an insane need to hold Owen in a protective embrace, he knew that wasn't what the feline needed or wanted at that point. So instead, he'd give Owen what he'd been pleading for. Garrett lined the tip of his cock with Owen's hole, then slowly pressed in. Owen moaned, his body opening and yielding to Garrett's intrusion. Garrett bit his bottom lip. The tight way Owen's ass held him made him almost lose control. Somehow, Garrett managed to dig deep and hold back his baser needs until he was fully seated inside Owen.

Garrett's pants were uncomfortable and chaffing against his thighs, but he didn't care enough to stop. Not when it felt so good to be inside Owen. Shit, it was more than good, the heat of the feline sent sparks of pleasure up Garrett's body. Owen started to impatiently thrust back and Garrett got the hint. Grabbing a fistful of Owen's hair, Garrett began to thrust in and out.

"Yes," Owen hummed, a wicked grin covering his lips. "Just like that."

After that Garrett didn't hold back anything. If things got a bit rough, Owen seemed to only to enjoy it more. Somewhere along the way, Owen's arms gave out and he fell forward, his

cheek resting against the floor. Garrett still continued to fuck him hard and fast. Owen would probably have one hell of a rug burn the next day, but he didn't utter a word of complaint.

Even in the new position, Garrett kept a tight hold on Owen's hair. Tears built up in Owen's eyes, from pain or something else, Garrett didn't know for sure, all he did know was that a part of him reveled getting such a visceral reaction from his lover.

Owen tensed up, his chest sucking in sharply before he came, shooting thick ropes of spunk all over Garrett's carpet. The sharp scent of Owen's semen mixed in with smells of sweat and sex was enough to push Garrett to the edge. He threw back his head and moaned as a hard orgasm washed over his body.

"Fuck, you're good," Garrett breathed as his cock emptied inside Owen's ass.

"You, too," Owen moaned as he reached clumsily behind him to stroke Garrett's thigh.

He continued to caress Garrett until he finally pulled his limp cock free. Garrett settled back on his heel and watched as Owen rolled to his side. He gave Garrett the sweetest of smiles.

"Thanks, I really needed that."

"Me, too," Garrett admitted.

Owen nibbled on his bottom lip. "So, I guess I should be heading home now."

Garrett stood and pulled up his pants. "Not yet, I'm not done playing." He stretched out his hand.

Owen only hesitated a second before reaching up to take it.

Chapter Seven

Owen tipped his head back and let the warm water cascade down his back. Several spots on his body were sore, but in a good way. He smiled as he replayed some of the better moments from the previous night.

They'd fucked most of the night, stopping only a couple of hours ago when both of them had collapsed from sheer exhaustion. It had all been a new experience for Owen. Not the screwing part. He hadn't been a virgin since he'd been fifteen and met a very friendly wolf shifter while out on a mission. It's just Owen had never had the chance to actually take his time and savor any of his experiences. Always worried about getting back to Greggson or Edward, Owen had made due with quickies in the back seats of cars or behind buildings.

Being able to fully get naked and use a bed had been a lot nicer. So much so that Owen had almost been reluctant to get up and leave the warmth of Garrett's body. It'd only been the overwhelming need to clean the sweat and dried cum off him that'd driven Owen to the shower.

He hoped Garrett didn't mind him helping himself to some clean towels and shampoo. Owen smiled, if the Hawk did, then he'd just have to find a way to make it up to him. Off the top of his head, Owen could think of four...wait, make that five, ways to show his gratitude.

The shower curtain whipped open and Owen found himself locked in Garrett's stare. The Hawk was nude, his large cock already hard. Owen's heart started hammering as he wondered if this was the part where Garrett gave him a curt goodbye before kicking him out. Not that Owen minded. Both of them had agreed that this would be a one shot deal. He still would like to at least finish his shower first though.

"I'll be out of your way in a second. I just didn't want to have to walk through headquarters while looking like I've been rode hard and put up wet," Owen quipped, using humor to hide his nervousness.

Garrett didn't reply. He just stepped into the shower, crowding in. Owen found his back pressed against the cool tile of the stall. While he and Garrett were both around the same size and build, Owen felt totally and thrillingly dominated by the man.

"If you wanted to shower, you should have just asked. I would have hurried out." Owen felt his own cock start to harden as he reached out and braced his hands on Garrett's water slicked shoulders.

"It's not the shower I want," Garrett said, his dark gaze hungrily traveling over Owen's body.

“Really?” Owen tilted his head to the side and tried to plaster on his best coy expression.

“No, it’s you I need.”

Garrett captured Owen’s lips in a hard, commanding kiss. Owen let out a gasp that was swallowed by Garrett’s mouth. Wow, the last thing he’d hoped for was a wake up fuck.

“I thought I wore you out last night,” Owen teased between kisses.

“You did—almost.”

Garrett reached over and grabbed a bottle of baby oil. Pouring a generous amount in his hand, he slicked his cock up before spinning Owen around and roughly pinning him face first against the wall.

“What? No foreplay?” Owen asked, only half-kidding.

He got his answer when Garrett’s cock slid inside him. Luckily Owen was still stretched from earlier, so there was only a small bite of pain. He curled his fingers against the cool tile, pleasure rolling over him as Garrett began to fuck him.

“I should warn you that I’m probably not going to last long,” Owen moaned, a tingling sensation already building up at his spine.

“That’s good, because I don’t think I will either,” Garrett admitted with a throaty chuckle.

“Because I did wear you out last night,” Owen goaded.

That earned him a hard bite on the neck, just above where his shoulder joined. Owen yelled as pleasure mixed with pain. He came hard, his cum coating the off-white tiles. A second later, Garrett roared his own release, his cock pulsating as it released inside Owen.

“But even so, you still came first. So who really wore out who?” Garrett punctuated his point with one last kiss.

“I guess you have me there,” Owen admitted once he caught his breath.

They washed each other off before going back to the bedroom to get dressed. The entire time, Owen became painfully aware of the heavy awkwardness that had settled over them. “I’ll call a taxi to drive me back,” he offered as he sat down on the edge of the bed to pull his shoes on.

Garrett shook his head. “That won’t be necessary. I have to go into HQ for a meeting so I’m going in anyway.”

They finished getting dressed, then went out to the car. The ride there the most tense ten minutes in Owen’s life. While both he and Garrett had agreed to no strings being attached a part of it, Owen felt as if they were leaving something unfinished. He didn’t dare speak that aloud though. The last thing he needed or wanted was for Garrett to think he was clingy or something.

Once they got to headquarters, Owen grabbed the bag with his ornament and taffy, then had the door opened as soon as Garrett stopped the car. Jumping out as if the thing were on

fire, Owen only paused long enough to toss back, "Thanks, I had fun."

He slammed the door and rushed to the building. The entire way there, he had to fight the almost overwhelming urge to turn back and glance at Garrett. It was just a fun time. Don't go making it something more in your mind. Even if you wanted to take things farther, Garrett has made it clear he doesn't want any commitments. You don't need to open yourself up for more rejection, Owen admonished himself.

He went inside and hurried to the apartment. Since their dwelling was in the back, he had to walk through the building, which just happened to be immense since it had at one time been an auto factory. Along the way, a few felines called a greeting out to him, which he dully returned. When he finally got to the steps leading to the front door of the apartment, Owen breathed a sigh of relief.

All he wanted to do was to get inside, grab some breakfast, then crash for a while. Maybe once he got some sleep, his head would be cleared and he'd be over this sudden, weird attachment he'd developed for Garrett.

The place was blessedly quiet. All the others must be at work, just as he'd hoped. He went into the kitchen, sat down his bags and slapped himself together a peanut butter and sugar sandwich. He'd just taken his first bite when Cassie strolled in.

"I was wondering when you'd come crawling home."

"Hey," he replied, going to the fridge for some milk. He grabbed a glass from the cupboard and filled it.

"Are you going to give me any down and dirty details," she prodded as she took a seat at the small dinette they had in the kitchen. A much larger table, made to sit all of the family, took up almost the entire space of the dining room.

"Perv," Owen accused as he took the seat opposite of her.

"So, I take that as a no?" She arched a brow at him before reaching out to lightly touch his neck. "Nice bite mark you have there."

Owen flushed as he brought a hand up to the offending spot. "We kind of got carried away I guess."

"Looks more to me like it was just Garrett who lost control."

Owen smiled as he recalled that moment. "Yeah, he did."

"Kinky, kinky, kinky," Cassie admonished with a sly grin.

"You should know, I heard you and wolf boy howling when he came to visit last week," Owen teased back.

She kicked his chair, her foot coming dangerously close to hitting his crotch. For nearly the first time since he'd known her, a slight flush covered her cheeks. "Smartass."

"I've been wondering about something."

"What?"

"It's obvious you and Chris really like each other. So why haven't you two claimed each other as mates?"

Cassie began to nervously toy with a placemat. "It's not that simple between us. Chris leads a wolf pack and I'm a feline."

"True, but Mitchell is mated to Chris's brother Dean. Since Mitchell is the leader of the coalition, I would think that's the same situation," Owen pointed out.

"It's different for us."

Owen shrugged. "How so?"

She twisted her lips into a grimace before saying, "Because there's no way Mitchell can accidentally knock Dean up with some freaky, half-breed baby."

He paused, shocked that had never occurred to him before. "Oh, I guess you do have a point there. Isn't there some sort of birth control you can use?"

"For other females, sure. Doc Featherstone has some supposedly vile tasting concoction he mixes up. That's not an option for me." Cassie sighed.

"Why?"

"Because I'm the only one who can carry on our family line. Since all my brothers have chosen to mate with other males, it's up to me to produce an heir."

Owen wrinkled his nose. "That sounds like a line from some medieval romance novel or something."

She arched a brow. "How would you know that? You read them or something?"

"Hey, I have to entertain myself somehow, since I'm grounded from computers and the internet. I can't do my research all the time."

"I'll be storing that piece of info to use as blackmail at a later date." She mimicked making a check mark in the air with her finger.

"Let's get back to the subject," Owen drawled. "So, did Mitchell tell you it was your job to produce the next baby Jaguar?"

"No, but I know my family obligations."

Owen shook his head in confusion, a bit outraged that someone he cared for felt so trapped and helpless. He knew better than anyone how it sucked to be in that position. "Isn't there some other way for them to get a child? Maybe artificial insemination or something?"

"Those kinds of medical treatments have never worked for any breed of shifter. They don't know why, but the only way we can reproduce is the good old fashioned method."

"That's not fair for your brothers to put you in this situation. Why should they get happiness while you suffer?" Owen's voice tightened with anger.

Cassie reached across the table and grabbed his hand. "Don't get angry at them. I don't think any of them ever dreamed I'd fall for a wolf. Felines normally stick to their own kind, Brent and Mitchell were just an anomaly."

Felines stick to their own kind. For some strange reason those words hit Owen like a blow as his mind immediately went to Garrett. "Is that true with all the shifter breeds? You know, sticking to their own kind."

Her eyes softened with understanding. "Usually, yes. That doesn't mean that Garrett couldn't be different though."

Owen's spine stiffened. "I wasn't talking about him."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Absolutely, we both agreed that it would be a one-night hookup and nothing more," Owen argued even as his gut clenched at the thought of never being with Garrett again.

Fuck, I need to stop reading romance books because I'm actually starting to believe that there are happily ever afters in real life. Maybe there were some couples who could make it work, he conceded to himself as he thought about Andrew and Vapor. Despite all the odds, those two had managed to end up together and judging by the goofy grin always on Andrew's face they were damn happy. That still didn't mean that Owen would ever find the same thing.

His gaze drifted from the bags he'd brought home. Not only did they hold taffy, but that stupid cat ornament. Garrett had insisted on buying it for him and Owen, in a rare fit of sappi-ness, had allowed him to. While the gesture was sweet and thoughtful, Owen knew better than to read too much into it. That still didn't mean he couldn't find a way to help Cassie out.

"Don't give up hope on being with Chris," he advised, his gaze still fixated on the bags. "I'm working on a project now, but as soon as I'm done with that, maybe I could figure out a way around this whole insemination issue."

"Okay," Cassie agreed, but her face became lined with doubt.

Not that Owen blamed her. Not when he'd never revealed the full extent of his skills to the coalition. After so many years of Edward pounding the need for secrecy into his head, Owen still had a lot to learn when it came to sharing. He darted a worried glance over his shoulder before asking, "Do you want to know what I'm currently working on?"

"Another tranquilizer like the one Andrew used on Vapor," Cassie guessed.

"No, I think I may be close to finding out why so many shifters are turning too early."

Cassie sucked in a shocked breath. "You mean the ones who've been transforming before their twenty-fifth birthday."

He nodded, not bothering to hide his cocky grin. "Yeah."

"But Mitchell's had his best scientists and doctors working on that problem for months."

They may have, but none of them were as good with chemicals and toxins as he was and that's what Owen suspected had been used. He held that theory to himself though. He'd only spill that bombshell once he was certain of it. "Promise you won't say anything until I'm for sure I have something concrete. I don't want to get anybody's hopes up. I'll probably just end up fucking it up just like I've done with everything else since I've moved here."

"You are not a fuck up!" Cassie defended savagely, before adding, "Don't worry, I won't say a word about this conversation so long as you promise not to tell the others my true feelings for Chris."

"Deal," Owen agreed before they settled into a comfortable silence.

The solitude broke when Seth came into the kitchen and leaned against the counter. As always, his older brother looked so put together, his white blond hair styled perfectly and not even the smallest of a wrinkle in his uniform. He crossed his arms over his chest and studied Owen. "Did you have a good time last night?"

Owen had to resist the temptation to hide the damning mark on his neck. "Yeah, Garrett's really nice."

"That's not what I heard."

Owen narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Did you check up on him or something?"

"Of course I did," Seth replied without a hint of guilt.

Cassie grabbed Owen's hand again. "Don't get upset. Mitchell would have done the same thing if it had been one of us."

It was hard, but Owen swallowed his anger. Maybe felines were just overly, obnoxiously, aggravatingly overprotective of younger siblings or something. "What did you find out about him?"

"Just what I told you last night. That he likes to play around, but he never sleeps with the same guy twice. Although, up until you, he's always stuck with other Hawks."

"I feel so special," Owen replied, a slice of jealousy going through him as he thought of Garrett sharing his bed with anybody else—be they Hawk, Tiger or Hippopotamus.

He tapped that emotion down, too. Reminding himself he had no claim to Garrett and the sooner he realized that, the better.

"I didn't come in here to talk to you about that though," Seth sighed heavily as he ran a hand over his head.

Panic ran through Owen as he wondered if they'd somehow found out he'd snagged some alone time with Andrew's computer. Working hard to calm his racing heart, lest Seth smell the fear, Owen asked, "What did you need?"

"I know I promised to train with you tonight, but I just found out I have to go on a mission. It's going to last a few days, too."

Owen looked past Seth's feet and noticed the large duffle bag resting by the front door. "You're leaving right now?"

Surprisingly, Owen felt a bit disappointed that Seth was bailing on their plans. Sure it was only mediation and other stupid feel-good stuff, but it had been the first time the two of them had ever made plans. Owen swallowed the hurt burning his throat. He knew he had no right to feel shafted after all the times he'd pushed Seth away, plus his brother couldn't exactly disobey direct orders to go out on assignment.

"It's no big deal, I have a ton of work to do in the lab," Owen said, forcing his stiff lips into a smile.

Not for the first time, it struck him how nobody ever bothered to ask him what said work entailed. They all probably thought he was some weirdo who liked to play with his chemistry set and pretend that he was important. Nobody aside from Garrett and Cassie had even stepped foot inside his private room.

"I know the timing sucks, but since I volunteered for this mission, Mitchell promised I could have Thanksgiving off," Seth explained.

"I see," Owen replied weakly, realizing his brother had willingly broken their plans after all. Owen shot to his feet before he did something stupid, like actually admit that he cared Seth had chosen him last. As he brushed past Seth, Owen mumbled, "Be safe. I'll see you in a few days."

He rushed to the back of hallway, leading to their sleeping quarters. Behind him he could hear conversation, Seth's deep, rumbling voice and Cassie's angry tones. Owen didn't even bother trying to pick up what they were saying, too upset and hurt to care.

As he passed by the room Seth shared with Noah, Owen noticed their door stood slightly ajar. Peering in, he spotted Seth's laptop sitting on a desk. Owen paused, temptation nagging him. His fingers nearly itched with the need to work that keyboard. It would feel so damn good to have that power under his control again, to be able to access so much information just by pressing a few buttons.

He gnawed on his bottom lip as he hesitated, warring emotions churning in his gut. Mitchell had made it perfectly clear that any computer was totally off limits to Owen. If he were caught on one, he had no doubt the coalition leader would throw him back in jail. While Owen had only spent a few hours there when he'd been brought in, he didn't relish repeating the adventure.

Still, he'd only be taking it for an hour or two. Just long enough to check his emails and look up a few pieces of data he needed to complete his research. He could sneak the computer back to his room, find what he needed and have it back in Seth's room before anyone was any the wiser.

The computer almost seemed to be mocking him, Come and get me, Owen. It's not like anybody notices you anyway. You could probably parade around the living room with me in your hands and nobody would look up from their own lives long enough to notice.

Owen nervously licked his lips as he realized the inanimate object had a point. Casting one more cautious glance over his shoulder, Owen stole into the room and grabbed the computer.

Chapter Eight

Garrett hesitated as he stood in front of door to Owen's lab.

Three days. It had been three days since he'd driven Owen home and they'd parted ways. Ever since Garrett hadn't been able to get the punk feline out of his mind. Garrett began to pace the dimly lit hallway as he worked the problem of his sudden infatuation with Owen through his mind.

What in the hell was so special about this Tiger and how had he managed to get so buried under Garrett's skin? In the past seventy-six hours and forty-five minutes, he'd tried everything, jacking off, watching porn, working out to the point of near exhaustion and nothing had worked. Out of desperation, he'd even tried to hook up with another Hawk. He'd grabbed the younger soldier, dragged him to one of the supply closets and pinned him to the wall. After one kiss, Garrett knew it wouldn't work. He'd made some mumbled excuse and left.

Now he'd resorted to lingering outside Owen's lab as if he were some lovesick stalker. The only thing missing was for him to press his cheek to the door while he longingly whispered Owen's name. Then the whole pathetic picture would be complete.

The most infuriating part had to be that Owen couldn't care less. The few times Garrett had caught brief glances of the man, Owen had always been smiling and acting so carefree. It's as if nothing in his life had changed.

But isn't that exactly the arrangement both of you agreed to in the first place? A tiny voice nagged in his head.

Yes, it had, that still hadn't stopped him from wanting another taste of the Tiger. Garrett stopped his pacing as a solution came to him. All he needed was one more encounter with Owen. After that, surely he'd be able to get the punk and his sweet body off the brain.

That would go against all of Garrett's self-imposed rules though. He'd always made sure to keep his hook-ups to one-time encounters, never going back for seconds because then things could get too emotional. Try telling that to his cock because the moment he'd entertained the idea of taking Owen again, it had stood at attention.

Garrett moved closer to the door, not quite stooping so low as to give in and actually press his cheek against the cheap wood. Even without opening it, he knew Owen was on the other side. Garrett could smell him, the slightly wild, almost jungle-like scent that was uniquely Owen. Even now, some of the smell still lingered on Garrett's body, refusing to come off despite the fact he'd taken several showers.

It all became too much for Garrett. With a growl of frustration he pushed open the door, not even bothering to knock. The wood bounced loudly off the wall, startling Owen who sat

behind his desk.

For a few breaths, Garrett just studied him, once again wondering what it was about this feline that made him so different from all the others. Owen had a pair of ridiculous safety goggles on, the dorkiness of them only adding to his appeal. He'd changed the highlights in his hair to purple, which matched the tight hoodie he wore. While he had the new tennis shoes on, his jeans had seen better days.

"Garrett? What are you doing here?" Owen demanded, a slight frown on his face.

Garrett slammed the door shut and blindly reached behind to engage the flimsy lock.

Owen swallowed nervously, "Did I forget something at your place?"

"Stand up," Garrett ordered in his best don't-you-dare-disobey voice.

Owen tugged on one of the spikes in his hair as he blinked a few times. "Why?"

"Did I say the floor was open for questions? Just do it."

Owen bristled and for a fraction of a second, Garrett thought a fuck-off would be coming his way. Then Owen's blue eyes grew dark with desire as he pushed back the folding chair and slowly rose to his feet. The scent of his arousal filled the air, making Garrett's cock ache in response. Owen started to move his hand up to take off the safety goggles.

"Stop! I want you keep them on," Garrett commanded. Call him kinky, but the idea of fucking Owen while he still wore the totally unsexy glasses made Garrett almost cream his pants on the spot.

"Huh?" Owen paused, hand halfway to his face.

"Again with the questions. Maybe I should just forget this and leave," Garrett threatened, even though he knew there was no way in hell he'd go through with it.

"Sorry, it won't happen again." Owen dropped his hand.

Then he did the most beautiful thing Garrett had ever seen, slowly the Tiger lowered his passion infused gaze and titled his head slightly down. It was a move of pure submission—complete surrender and the predator in Garrett totally approved. At that moment, Garrett realized he could have commanded anything and Owen would have gladly given it to him. All he'd have to do is snap his fingers and Owen would instantly drop to his knees and worship Garrett's cock. While that was a tempting prospect, Garrett had something better in mind.

"Do you like to come?" Garrett asked in his best casual voice. Even though Owen kept his head lowered, Garrett still caught a flash of a smile on those oh-so-fuckable lips.

"Doesn't everybody?"

"I believe we've already determined that you weren't permitted to ask questions."

Owen sucked in a hard breath. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize, instead just make sure you don't keep making the same mistakes. Now, answer me, do you like to come?"

“Yes, especially with you.”

That confession sent a fresh wave of desire over Garrett’s body. “Good boy, that was the right answer.”

Garrett walked forward until he was inches from Owen. Leaning forward, he blew on Owen’s ear, before issuing the next order, “Drop your pants. I want to see that big cock of yours.”

Another smile flashed over Owen’s mouth. “You think I have a big cock?”

Garrett placed a finger on Owen’s lips in a shushing manner. “That was another question and stop fishing for compliments.”

“It’s not fishing if it’s true.” Owen’s dimple made a very brief appearance.

“Stop talking and drop the damn pants.” Garrett leaned forward to give Owen’s ear a nip.

“You sure are bitey sometimes,” Owen observed breathlessly as he started to fumble with his fly.

“Do you want me to stop?”

Owen finally got his pants undone. They fell to the ground to pool around his feet, the denim acting as a makeshift hobble. While Garrett could have very easily ordered Owen to kick off his shoes, it was nice to have the Tiger even more under his control. Garrett looked down between them, his mouth watering at the sight of Owen’s thick, hard cock. A drop of precum had collected at the tip. Usually Garrett always made sure that he was on the receiving end of a blow job, but this time would be different. He’d been wondering what Owen’s cock tasted like and he wasn’t leaving the room until he knew. Owen started to reach for his own dick, but Garrett slapped his hand away. “No touching allowed. I’m in control.”

“But I thought you said I could come,” Owen panted.

“No, I just asked you if you liked to. I didn’t make any promise that you would. I could just throw you face down on your desk, fuck the hell out of you and leave before you have a chance to shoot off.”

Owen let out a soft whimper, a fine sheen of sweat breaking out on his upper lip. “Please.”

“I’ll tell you what, since you begged so good, I’ll let you come.”

Owen let out a pleased sound as he rubbed his head into Garrett’s shoulder. Once again, a show of submission and once again, it sent a heady thrill through Garrett. At that moment, Garrett realized that this had gone much further than a one-fuck deal. That he’d grown to care very much for the shy Tiger shifter. So much so, that if he were to see any other men touch Owen, Garrett would lose his mind with jealousy.

He knew that walking away would be the best thing for both of them. A little voice in his head screamed, Abort! Abort! Run for cover! Then Owen nuzzled him again and Garrett felt all his resolve shatter. All his life he’d always taken what he wanted and he couldn’t think of

anything he'd ever wanted more than Owen.

Garrett eased his hand between them, down to Owen's cock. Swiping up the pre-cum, Garrett brought it to his mouth and carefully licked it clean. As expected, it tasted damn good, the small sample wasn't nearly enough. Curling his lips into a wicked smile, Garrett said, "In fact, you look so damn cute in those glasses, I just may let you come twice."

"Fuck," Owen cried, his hands reaching behind grab the edge of the desk.

"Listen to how eloquent my little genius is," Garrett crooned as he fell to his knees.

"Right now I'm having trouble thinking, let alone speaking," Owen gasped when Garrett's tongue flicked out for another taste.

"Then just keep quiet and enjoy what I'm about to do," Garrett advised before he parted his lips and took Owen's cock in.

Owen let out a long hiss, his head tipping back to expose his neck. Even with Owen's superior shifter healing abilities, Garrett could still see traces of the bite mark on his neck. A thrill of ownership traveled through Garrett. Other men may look and lust after Owen all they want, but it was he who'd left his mark on the feline. Just like it was he who was going to make Owen scream in pleasure.

Garrett used all the skills he'd picked up over the years and then a few he made up on the fly to reduce Owen to a babbling mess. Halfway through, he felt Owen's fingers timidly touching the top of his head. When Garrett didn't voice any protest, that must have emboldened Owen because he plunged his hands through Garrett's hair and gently pulled.

That didn't mean Garrett gave up all control though. Owen started to rock his hips, little moans slipping past his lips. Garrett reached up and splayed one hand over Owen's stomach in a silent order to stay still.

"I need..." Owen trailed off, his bottom lip catching under his teeth. Sweat made a few locks of his blond hair plaster to his forehead and his cheeks were flush with passion.

Garrett pulled back, Owens' cock sliding out with a loud, wet sound. "Don't worry, I know what you need."

He did, too. Somehow with Owen, Garrett knew just the right buttons to push to get the most visceral reactions. He transferred his mouth to one of Owen's balls, sucking it in deep. At the same time, Garrett stroked Owen's cock, his spit making for a smooth ride.

Owen's gave out a sharp cry, his dick jerking. Garrett moved his lips over right in time to capture the thick ropes of cum. It filled his mouth before sliding down his throat and Garrett savored every drop of it. It wasn't until Owen gave one last shudder that Garrett licked him clean and stood up.

"That was one. Now I owe you another," Garrett said before he grabbed Owen by the shoulder, spinning him around.

The pants still around Owen's ankles made the moment a bit awkward. Only Garrett's firm grip kept the Tiger from falling onto his face. They managed though and soon Garrett had Owen face down on the desk. Papers, pens and notebooks flew everywhere, some of the items falling to the ground, but neither one of them cared.

"I have lube in the upper right hand drawer," Owen yelled out so quickly the words almost tumbled together.

Garrett opened the drawer and grabbed the tube, noticing with a bit of satisfaction that it looked as if it had never been used before. When he started to slick Owen up, the shifter shook his head.

"Just fuck me."

"I don't want to hurt you," Garrett hesitated.

Owen arched his back, a low snarl passing his lips. "That's what I want, now do it!"

"Who knew that behind the shy, nerdy Tiger shifter lay a pain whore?" Garrett admonished affectionately.

If Owen wanted it rough, then Garrett would be more than happy to meet that demand. He paused only long enough to slick some lube onto his cock before he lined up the tip to Owen's hole. When Owen gave another snarl, Garrett answered it by sliding inside the man.

Owen screamed, his hands shooting out to grab the edge of the desk. Garrett paused, terrified he'd taken things too far. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I've never felt better." The look of utter bliss that passed over Owen's sweat-streaked face attested to his claim.

Garrett glanced down at the bite mark. He'd only been half-kidding when he'd accused Owen of being into pain before, but now he'd begun to wonder if maybe he'd had a valid point. Could it be possible that Owen couldn't get off without pain and why did it turn Garrett on so much to help him out with that? Did that mean they were both a little twisted?

Garrett pushed that worry aside and concentrated instead on the beautiful way Owen's back shifted as Garrett pounded into him. His thrust grew so powerful, the desk started to move across the rough concrete floor, the metal legs making a loud squeaking noise that mixed in with the sounds of flesh hitting flesh, grunts and Owen's moans.

"Shit, I can't believe it," Owen gasped, his fingers still curled around the edge of the desk.

Garrett figured the shifter's hands would be getting cramps soon. "Can't believe what? That we're fucking again?" Garrett slightly changed the angle of his stroke so he pegged Owen's sweet spot.

Owen let out a loud cry of pleasure before answering, "No, I can't believe I'm about to come again."

That became a challenge to Garrett because he was damn close, too. He'd be damned if he'd let the punk show him up. Garrett fisted one hand in Owen's hair and growled, "Then come for me, babe."

He gave a hard tug of Owen's head and that seemed to shred the Tiger's control. He let out a strangled cry as he shot off, cum splattering on the desk and floor. Garrett said a silent prayer of thanks because that meant he could find his release next. He gave one last hard surge before an orgasm slammed into him so hard he almost forgot how to breathe.

He arched over Owen, letting his forehead fall on the man's back. The added weight probably didn't feel good to Owen's chest, but he didn't complain. Garrett took that moment to catch his breath, his nose buried in Owen's hoodie. The material smelled so good because it had Owen's scent and for one brief moment of insanity, Garrett wondered what it would be like to fall asleep every night, curled against the Tiger.

"I thought we weren't going to do this again," Owen said, his voice slightly muffled.

"I thought one last time couldn't hurt," Garrett replied. Even as he said that, Garrett realized he was fooling himself. He had the sneaky suspicion that he'd never get his fill of Owen even if they fucked each other every night for the next several decades.

The problem was what was Garrett going to do about his feelings?

Chapter Nine

Several hours after Garrett had left, Owen finally finished up his work for the day. As he shut one of his many notebooks, he couldn't hold in the short burst of laughter.

He'd done it. Somehow, small and insignificant him, had figured out the puzzle that had stumped the coalition's best minds. He ran his palm over the pile of notebooks. On those pages lay the answer to why so many felines were shifting too early.

A pang of sadness went through him. If only he'd been able to find the solution sooner, then so much suffering could have been prevented. Not only had so many gone through the agony of an unprepared shift, but some had died. Not just any death either, but a torturous gruesome fate when their bodies had become stuck between both forms. While Owen had never seen a case in person, the photos he'd viewed haunted his dreams.

He recalled the one and only time he'd shifted. It'd been when he still lived with Edward. Owen had been working in the basement when his Tiger had basically pimp-smacked him and demanded to come out. Unprepared and scared, Owen tried to fight it and the results hadn't been pretty. He'd lain on the dusty floor, bones breaking and resetting, muscles tearing and his skin slowly ripping before he'd finally fully shifted to his Tiger.

He'd heard cases of some shifters going batshit crazy because of the pain and he could totally believe it. When he'd been going through it, he'd have shot himself in the head just to get a respite from the agony. A shiver of dread went down his spine as he contemplated having to go through that again. There was no doubt that he would, too. Even if they were able to find a cure, eventually he'd reach the age that felines naturally shifted. Then his DNA would take over and he wouldn't have a choice.

Since he joined the coalition, he'd seen dozens of felines and Hawks shift. It was always quick and seamless. Never did they show a hint of the pain he'd experienced, but that was because they'd had an older shifter to mentor and train them. Something Owen didn't have, especially after Seth had blown him off.

Not that Owen could really fault Seth. He realized what a disappointment he'd been to his brother. Plus Owen had pushed Seth away so many times he wouldn't be surprised if his sibling wrote him off.

He glanced down at the notebooks again. Maybe once Seth realized that Owen could actually contribute something to the coalition, things would change between them. Better yet, maybe everyone would start to see him as someone other than, the jerk who'd hacked into the coalition system and shut everything down.

His cell phone started to ring, drawing him out of his troubled thoughts. He picked it up and frowned when he saw his brother's name on the call ID. Seth must have got back from his mission and decided he needed to check up to make sure Owen was being a good boy. Well this time Seth would be in for a shock because Owen actually had something good to report. Owen hit the connect button. "Hey, you're home?"

"Yeah, and I need you to get back to the apartment right away," Seth replied curtly.

He tried not to let Seth's less than warm and fuzzy attitude get him down. "No problem, I can be there in a couple of minutes. There's something I wanted to show you anyhow."

"I'm sure there is," Seth replied, the sarcasm unmistakable in his tone.

Owen's heart skipped a beat the same way it always did whenever he realized he'd somehow let somebody in authority down. He didn't know for sure what he'd done to upset Seth so much, but it was clear he was not pleased at all. Owen clutched the phone tighter so it didn't slip from his suddenly sweaty hand. "I'm on my way."

"You better be. Don't make me have to come looking for you."

Owen continued to hold the phone to his ear long after Seth hung up. His mind raced through all of what he could have done wrong before it settled on one thing—the computer. Somehow they must have discovered he'd borrowed Seth's laptop and now there would be hell to pay.

He quickly gathered up the notebooks and shoved them into a messenger bag. He left, his hands shaking so badly he could barely lock the door behind him. It didn't help his already frayed nerves that he had to walk by the jail cells on his way out. While they were all currently empty, he had a sinking suspicion that his ass would soon be stewing inside one of them.

He raced through HQ at a near run. While he dreaded the upcoming confrontation, he didn't want to make things worse by forcing Seth to wait. Once Owen got inside the apartment, he found it strangely deserted. So often he'd lamented how noisy the dwelling was, but at that moment, the silence terrified him because it seemed like a bad omen. "Hello?" he called as he walked through the living room.

"In here," Seth's voice came from the kitchen.

Owen made his way into the room and almost dropped his bag when he saw the laptop sitting in the middle of the table. Seth leaned against a counter, his arms crossed over his chest and a look of pure fury on his face. Mitchell stood on the opposite side of the table, his hands splayed on either side of the computer, almost as if framing the damning piece of evidence. Where Seth fairly oozed anger, Mitchell appeared as cool and collected as ever. Owen couldn't decide which reaction scared him the most. "I can explain," Owen rushed out in a trembling voice.

“Really?” Seth snapped. “Because I would just love to hear what excuse you shoot off this time.”

“I only used it for a couple of minutes so I could check my emails and do a little bit of research.”

“You’re not supposed to be using a computer period. That was one of the conditions of me agreeing not to put you in jail,” Mitchell said, his gaze seeming to penetrate straight to Owen’s guilty soul.

“I know and I’m so, so sorry.”

Seth let out a loud curse, making Owen jump in fear. “Damn it, Owen! When are you going to get your fucking head screwed on right? What kind of research were you doing anyway? Were you trying to find another poison to use on some poor sap like Vapor?”

“No, I swear that wasn’t all I was working on.” Owen used both hands to clasp the strap of his bag to hide the fact they were shaking.

“Are you even working on anything down in that pit or are you just using that as an excuse to get away from us?” Seth advanced a step. “Because let’s face it, you never wanted to be here. The only reason you ever left your old home was to stay with Andrew and Shane. It sure as hell wasn’t because of me or for the coalition.”

“That’s not true. I was working on something for the coalition,” Owen protested. He retreated a step only to be drawn up short when his back bumped into the wall. He felt cornered and that brought back all kinds of other bad memories.

“Bullshit, you couldn’t care less about the rest of us,” Seth snarled.

“Seth, calm down,” Mitchell ordered in a hard voice. He then directed that probing glance at Owen again. “Is this the first time you’ve borrowed somebody’s computer?”

Owen wanted to lie, God did he ever. The last thing he wanted was to add more onto the pile of trouble he already was under. Yet, he just found he couldn’t stare Mitchell in the face and be untruthful. Despite everything, Owen felt a sense of loyalty and respect for his leader.

“No, it wasn’t. I used Andrew’s computer a couple of weeks ago,” Owen confessed, his heart sinking lower when he saw the look of hurt pass over Seth’s face.

“Shit, this just keeps getting better,” Seth spat.

“Andrew didn’t know anything about it,” Owen hastened to add. He’d be damned if he’d drag anyone else down with him.

“Oh, we’ll make sure of that when we question him,” Mitchell replied.

“Please, you have to believe me. I wouldn’t do anything to harm the coalition. At least not anymore,” Owen protested.

Seth took another step forward, his face a mask of fury. “Damn it...”

Whatever he may have said after that, Owen didn't hear. For all he saw was a threat coming his way. Years of conditioning and abuse made his reaction instinctive. Letting out a soft, mewling sound that would have embarrassed him under different circumstances, Owen covered his head with both arms and cowered against the wall.

Maybe it wasn't the most macho reaction, or the one that Shane or Andrew would have, but terror had taken over and it now ruled Owen. He even cringed as he waited for the blows to start raining down. He knew he deserved no less. By disobeying a direct order, he'd earned them and then some.

When after the longest time nothing happened, Owen peeked out from under his arms. Mitchell and Seth wore identical expressions of horror with a little dash of disgust mixed in. Seth's complexion even seemed a couple shades lighter.

"Go to your room and stay there until I call for you," Seth ordered in a near whisper.

A part of Owen wanted to snap that he wasn't some child to be sent to their room for a time out, but he knew better than to press his luck. Instead, he peeled himself from the wall and rushed from the kitchen.

Once he got to his room, he sat down and started to write a letter to Cassie. He briefly debated writing one to Shane and Andrew, but decided against it. Things would be better for all three of them if he just made a clean break. The only reason he even bothered writing Cassie was he needed to make sure someone took care of his notebooks and creatures.

After he finished the letter, he pulled the notebooks out of the messenger bag and set them in the middle of the bed where they would be easy to find. He placed the folded piece of paper on top of it. Finished with that task, he quickly filled the bag with clothing, making sure to take only the items he'd brought with him. Everything else, he left behind.

The hardest thing to leave in the closet was the heavy, leather coat. His only other jacket had been ruined in the church attack and all he had left were some hoodies. Grabbing the heaviest one, he slid it on. It would just have to do.

He quietly opened his door and stole down the hallway. He would hear the muted voices of Mitchell and Seth in the kitchen. Other than that, the apartment still remained empty.

Tears stung his eyes as he realized that he'd never see this place again. A part of him screamed that it was childish to run away like this. A bigger part told him it would be better for Shane, Seth and Andrew if they didn't have to deal with him and his problems. It was already bad enough he probably got Andrew in trouble for something he didn't even do. If Owen stayed, there would only be more incidents like that. With Andrew mated and Shane off learning how to be a better psycho, it was only fitting that Owen move on, too.

Owen gave the place one last glance before he slid out the front door.

A couple of hours later, Owen found himself standing in front of Garrett's apartment. The cold and a need to have someplace to sleep for the night had driven him there. He only hoped the Hawk didn't slam the door in his face.

Before he lost his courage, Owen knocked. The time it took for Garrett to answer was pure torture as Owen stressed over how he'd be received. Finally the door opened and he found himself face to face with Garrett. The Hawk had obviously been in bed, going by the way his brown hair was messed up and the fact he wore a pair of black sweatpants and nothing else. Only Garrett could make the jammie look come off sexy.

Fuck, who was he kidding? The real reason Owen had come crawling the small apartment was because he needed the comfort he knew only Garrett could provide. Call it foolish or naïveté, Owen just needed to be held at that moment, even if it was somebody who only saw him as a buddy fuck and nothing more.

"Can I crash here? I promise to be out of your hair first thing in the morning," Owen blurted, shivering against a sudden gust of wind.

Garrett looked him up and down a few times before nodding. "Sure, come in before you freeze your balls off."

Owen stepped in, the heat almost painful to his near freezing skin. "I'm sorry to bust in on you like this. I tried the church, but it's still closed for repairs."

"Where in the hell is your new coat?" Garrett demanded as he grabbed a blanket from the couch and threw it over Owen's shoulders.

"I left it behind when I left home." He decided not to elaborate that he had no intentions of ever going back.

"Are you crazy? I thought you'd learned not to go out at night on your own."

"I got into a fight with Seth and needed to cool my head some."

"Take your shoes off and come into bed. We need to get you warmed up before you go in to shock or something."

Owen kicked off his shoes, his movements clumsy because he shook so much. Once he had them off, he took Garrett's outstretched hand and allowed himself to be led to bedroom.

They climbed in under the covers, Garrett pulling Owen's back to his chest so they were in the classic spoon position. While it made it so they couldn't see each other's faces, Owen had never felt closer to anyone than he did to Garrett at that moment.

Things got better when Garrett began to stroke Owen's hair in slow, almost loving caresses. Owen allowed himself to relax for the first time since he'd entered the kitchen and spotted that damn computer. The heat of Garrett's body slowly began to warm Owen, even through the many layers of his clothing.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Garrett asked.

"No, I just want you to hold me, if that's okay?"

"Of course it is."

Owen blinked against the hot rush of tears threatening to fall from his eyes. "I swear I'll leave first thing tomorrow. I didn't want to drag you into my problems, I just needed some place to sleep."

"Shh..." Garrett gave him a soft kiss on the temple. "You can stay here as long as you want."

For a brief irrational moment, Owen allowed him to believe that Garrett meant he could stay forever. That the sex had actually meant something between them. That for the first time in his life, someone could actually want him for being just him and not for what he could do for them.

A stab of envy went through him as he thought about what Andrew and Vapor had. Of the looks of pure love the two often shared. How they were always reaching out to give one another caresses. Owen realized that he'd give anything to have even one slice of that with someone. No, correction, he'd give anything to have that with Garrett.

That could never be though, because Garrett had made it perfectly clear that what they had between them was just fucking and nothing more. True, Garrett had practically attacked him in the lab earlier, but that was just because he was horny and Owen was convenient, nothing more. Moreover, as he thought back to that encounter, the more certain things bothered him.

"Why do you always turn me around before you screw me?" he blurted.

Garrett's hand stilled. "What do you mean?"

"You've never fucked me face-to-face."

"Oh that," Garrett replied dismissively. "I've never liked to look anyone in the eyes while having sex. It's just too personal."

It felt as if a Raven had clawed his heart out, then tossed it to a Wolf to chew up. A fresh wave of tears flooded his eyes and Owen was powerless to stop them. He slightly tilted his face in the hopes the pillow would catch most of them.

At that moment Owen knew for sure he had no place in the coalition. Seth hated him. Mitchell didn't trust him. Andrew had moved on. Plus, stupid idiot that he was, Owen had fallen in love with someone who could never return the feeling.

It would be better for everyone, including him, if he just disappeared. Since he'd need some cash for that, he'd call one of his contacts from his old days. There had been a Jackal who'd been after Owen to help him on a job for a while. While the Jackal may be a half-crazed, deceitful bastard, he had promised a ton of money to Owen. Normally Owen would

never work with the jerk, but since he needed the money to start a new life, he didn't have a choice.

First thing tomorrow, he'd call the Jackal. After that, he'd leave Michigan and everything about it behind.

Chapter Ten

Seth stared down at his uneaten bowl of cereal as he rubbed his aching temples. He was exhausted, angry and more than a little worried about Owen. Mitchell and Seth had sat up most of the previous night, trying to figure out the best way to handle Owen's stubborn refusal to follow the rules. They'd come up with diddly-squat for answers, too.

The angry part of Seth just wanted to throw the brat into jail. Maybe a few months in a cage would make him more cooperative. The only thing that held him back from making that suggestion was the fact he actually cared for the punk. Owen may not be the most open and caring, but Seth had still grown to like the guy.

Andrew came in and took the chair opposite of him. The young Jaguar had a large frown on his face, his lips pressed tightly together.

"I take it Mitchell talked to you about Owen?" Seth surmised.

"Yeah," Andrew replied with a heavy sigh.

"Did you know what he was doing?"

Andrew shook his head. "Owen never said a word to me about it."

"Don't feel so bad. It seems that secrets and lying are what he does best," Seth replied bitterly.

"That's just it. Owen is the last one I expected this kind of thing from."

Seth didn't bother to hide his disbelief. "Why not? He's an admitted thief, hacker, plus he spends his free time playing with poison. He's not exactly the model citizen."

Andrew stared at Seth a few moments, almost as if seeing him for the first time. "You don't get him at all, do you?"

"No, I don't and that's because he never gave me the chance."

"Owen is different than you, me or probably anyone else in the coalition. Not just because he's a genius or because he'd rather spend his time with spiders either. He lives for rules and regulations."

Seth snorted. "Are you kidding me? Since he got here, all Owen has done is break rules and regulations."

"No he hasn't. When Mitchell took away his computer, Owen easily went along with it. That was huge for him, too. To Owen, his computer is his life, his way of surviving in the world. It would be the same thing as Mitchell stripping you and I of all our guns."

"Owen didn't go along with it, remember?" Seth pointed out.

"Then he must have had a good reason. I'm telling you, Seth, disobeying an order is not something Owen does. I remember one time when he went forty-eight hours without eating or

sleeping just because Edward forbade him to do anything until a certain project was completed. Even when I tried to sneak him some water, Owen wouldn't take it. Since he was a toddler, Owen has been conditioned to always obey, to never question an order, that if he wanted anything, he had to earn it with good behavior."

Seth's stomach did a slow roll as the beginnings of guilt hit him. "That's why he wouldn't take the clothes."

Andrew nodded. "Edward has him so twisted in the head that Owen doesn't think he deserves anything good. When he came here and you set him up with a room of his own and bought him everything he could need, it overwhelmed him. He couldn't understand why you would do that for him without him doing something in return. It confused the hell out of him and he couldn't deal. That's probably why Owen was leaving at night and hiding out at that church."

Understanding slammed into Seth, making his chest ache. "Because he didn't think he even deserved a damn bed?"

"Yeah."

Seth buried his face in his hands as he realized just how much he'd truly fucked up. An image of Owen's hurt expression flashed into his mind and it was all he could do not to break. "Why didn't you tell me all this sooner?"

"Because I thought you'd be smart enough to figure it out on your own," Andrew countered sharply.

The comment stung, but Seth knew he deserved it. He still had his face covered when Cassie came storming in and threw a huge stack of notebooks at him.

"You son of a bitch," she yelled, her face red with fury.

"What the hell?" Seth replied, exchanging looks of confusion with Andrew.

She held up a folded piece of paper that had her name written on it. "Owen left."

All the air seemed to leave the room as Seth's heart thudded in fear. "What do you mean he left?"

"He took off because he didn't want to be a bother to us anymore." A single tear streaked down her cheek.

Seth didn't take that as weakness on her part, because he knew she'd be giving him an ass kicking soon. Sure enough, she stalked over and slugged him hard in the shoulder. Seth hissed in pain. Damn Cassie really could pack a wallop. He didn't strike back or make a move to defend himself because Seth damn well knew he deserved what he got and then some. Andrew got up and went over to the notebooks. Kneeling down, he began to skim through them.

"What did the note say?" Seth asked as he rubbed his shoulder.

"He asked me to take care of his spiders and snakes," she gave a shudder to show what she thought of that request before continuing, "he also apologized for any trouble he caused and promised to send me an email once he got settled into his new home."

"Did he just leave the one note?" Seth pressed, his stomach churning in fear.

"Yes." She angrily wiped her cheeks.

It stung hard that Owen hadn't felt close enough to at least leave Seth a fuck-off message. But then why would he? Seth had all but betrayed him the night before. In a moment when Owen had needed a champion more than ever, Seth had failed him. No wonder he refuses to even look me in the eye.

"Oh my God," Andrew breathed as he continued to read. "He figured it out. That smart son of bitch did it."

"Did what?" Seth got up and joined Andrew on the floor.

He opened up one of the books and found page after page of meticulous notes. Most of it went over his head, but he was able to make out that Owen had been using venom to try to find out the solution for something.

"Owen figured out why so many felines have been shifting too soon." Andrew ran his fingers almost lovingly on the paper.

"That's why he used the computer. For his research," Cassie threw out angrily.

Seth allowed himself another moment of shock and guilt before he took action. "Andrew, take these notebooks to Doc. He'll need to verify the information and see if he can start on finding a cure. Cassie, go tell Brent and Mitchell what's going on. We need to organize a rescue team ASAP. Tell them we'll need some of the best trackers we have."

Andrew gathered up the notebooks and stood. "I'll call Shane, too."

Seth blanched. "Are you sure that's wise?"

"Yeah, if anyone can track Owen, it's him."

Against his better judgment, Seth nodded. "I think the first place we should look is Garrett's."

"Are you sure? Owen made it clear to me that they weren't a couple," Andrew argued.

"That may be, but it still doesn't change the fact that when Owen came in yesterday, he reeked of bird. Judging by how strong it was, I'd guess he'd been real close to Garrett sometime yesterday."

* * * *

Even before Garrett opened his eyes, he knew Owen had left. The bed, that just a week ago had seemed the perfect size, now seemed so large and cold. An empty space by his side screamed to be filled. He ran his palm over the sheets that still carried Owen's scent.

Garrett cursed himself for not saying something last night. Maybe if he'd told Owen his true feelings they'd still be together. Garrett snorted softly. Who in the hell was he kidding? They never had been truly together and he had no one to blame but himself. He'd been too afraid to put himself out there for rejection, instead letting his pride rule his actions. As a result, Owen had never known how much Garrett cared for him.

A loud pounding on the door made him sit up with a jerk. Hope swelled through him. Since nobody ever came to visit, it could only be Owen. He must have just gone out for breakfast or something. Garrett sprang to his feet, pausing only long enough to pull on a shirt.

"I guess this means, I'll have to give you a key," Garrett said, smiling as he opened the door. The happy feeling disappeared when he found himself facing Seth instead. The Tiger wasn't alone either. Cassie, Andrew, Shane, Mitchell and a half dozen others were crowding the narrow patio.

"Where is he?" Seth demanded, his eyes all ice.

"I don't know," Garrett admitted.

Shane pushed his way through the crowd and shoved Garrett aside so he could barge in. A small, almost innocent looking blond, Shane didn't look like the homicidal loony that he truly was. From what Garrett had heard of Leopard shifters, that was pretty much the norm.

"Bullshit, I can smell him," Shane observed in a soft, yet bone-chilling tone. He moved closer and nearly put his nose to Garrett's chest. "His scent covers you."

"He did come here last night, but when I woke up he was gone," Garrett admitted. His heart started to beat wildly, but it had nothing to do with fear of the feline posse invading his home. All he could think about was Owen being out there alone and at risk of being attacked again. "He didn't go back to HQ?"

"Duh," Shane cocked his head to the side as he slowly caressed the butt of a gun holstered to his side. "Would we be here looking for him if he was home where he belonged?"

God help him, but Garrett almost yelled that the only place Owen belonged was by his side. Then Garrett spotted something that shattered his world. Sitting on the counter was the box that held the ornament he'd bought Owen.

Brushing past Shane, Garrett went over and picked it up. The message of it being left there came out loud and clear. It was Owen's way of saying goodbye. "We have to find him."

Shane let out a snarl that sounded more animal than human. "No shit, Einstein."

"Be nice, Shane," Andrew admonished.

The rest of the gang filed into Garrett's apartment. Until that moment, he never realized how small his living room really was. Mitchell crossed his arms over his chest and took over. "Andrew, Shane, you know Owen best. What do you think his first move would be?"

"He needs cash and the only way for him to do that would be take on contract," Andrew replied.

"Shit, without us there to protect him, they'll eat them alive," Shane spat.

"Do you know who he'd call for a job?" Garrett asked.

"Give me five minutes. I'll ring up some of our old friends and see if any of them have heard anything." Shane paused, then pointed a finger at Garrett and then Seth. "I blame you two for this and trust me, you don't want to see me really pissed off."

Garrett didn't say anything in return, since he knew he deserved every bit of Shane's wrath. Truth be told, if anything happened to Owen, Garrett would probably take Shane's gun, point it at his own chest and beg the Leopard to do his best.

* * * *

Owen decided this had to be the stupidest moment of his life. He felt like such a Bella, or a too-stupid-to-live heroine from one of those romance novels he liked to read. Otherwise how else could he explain away the fact that he had the nuzzle of a gun pointed at the back of his head.

He squirmed against the ropes that had him tightly lashed to the rough, uncomfortable wood chair as he glared at the Jackal. That really was the asshat's name, too. Seriously, the guy must have a complex a mile wide to take on the name of a human criminal mastermind. Or perhaps the dummy had just picked it because that was his animal form. Either way, it spoke of an ego way too big.

Owen cursed himself for his stupidity. Andrew or Shane would have never just blindly tripped into a trap like he'd done. They would have smelled the setup or at the very least had been able to fight their way out.

Not Owen though. He'd not only agreed to meet the Jackal in this out-of-the-way house, he'd also failed to tell anyone where he was going. So even if the others decided they cared enough to search for him, they wouldn't have the first clue as to where to go. Now he found himself tied up, and not in a good way, while one of the Jackal's low-life henchmen held a gun to his head.

"This isn't the job I agreed to," Owen pointed out the obvious.

The Jackal laughed, showing off his rotted teeth. "True, but I decided why pay you for one job when I could just take you and make you work for me instead."

Owen almost called out Never! as he struggled against the ropes, but decided that would further be playing into the whole damsel in distress thing. So instead, he spat on the floor and yelled out a curse word that would have made Shane blush. That earned him a backhanded blow from the Jackal. Owen's head snapped to the side as he tasted blood.

"You always were the weakest of the three," the Jackal sneered, his pitted face so close, Owen could almost taste his garlic breath. "But then you are the smartest and that's what I'm going to put you to use."

A hysterical laugh slipped past Owen's lips. "If you think I'm going to do anything for you, then you're a bigger dumbass than I thought."

The Jackal smiled, almost as if that was the answer he'd been hoping for. Fear lanced through Owen as he realized there would be a good chance he wouldn't make out of this fuck up of a situation alive.

"Make Owen see the error of his ways," the Jackal ordered his henchmen.

The shifter came around and started to use the butt end of his gun to beat Owen. After the second or third blow, Owen stopped trying to hold in the cries of pain. Around the fifth one, he felt his nose break. The seventh blow shattered his jaw.

Something awoken inside Owen and he dimly realized it was his Tiger. It was pissed off, too. It even let out a loud roar as if demanding he release it. No! No! No! Not now, please. I can't take any more pain. The problem was, 'ol Tony the Tiger wasn't up for listening. Owen's body let out a wrenching spasm as the shift began.

Chapter Eleven

Two hours. That's how long it took them to figure out where Owen was and every one of those one hundred and twenty minutes felt like pure torture to Seth. All he wanted was to find Owen, hold him in a tight embrace, tell him everything was okay and most of all, finally tell him that he was proud to have him as a brother.

For Seth to do that though, they had get the little brat back in one piece.

As they slowly approached the decrepit house that looked like it should be on an episode of Hoarders, Seth strained his eyes for any sign of life. All he spotted was piles of old farm equipment, a rusted out truck, mounds of garbage and a half-demolished barn. The interior of the sagging purple and blue house appeared dark and vacant.

"Are you sure he's here?" he whispered to Shane.

Shane lifted his face into the wind, the moonlight glinting eerily off his cold gaze.

"Yes, I can smell him and that's not all. He's hurt."

Seth's chest seized with fear. "How do you know that?"

"Because I can also smell his blood."

A low growl sounded from behind them. Seth glanced back, not surprised to find the noise coming from Garrett. Despite what Owen claimed, with every passing moment it became clearer that Garrett cared a lot for the younger man. Nobody got that worked up over just a one-night stand.

"Besides, my contact said he'd be here," Shane replied as if that settled it all.

Seth was about to argue that point when he spotted a slight flicker of light coming from inside the house.

Garrett cursed under his breath as he rocked nervously on his feet. "How long do you cats plan on staying out here?"

"Be patient. We can't just storm in there without having a plan," Seth reasoned.

"In the meantime Owen is in there and hurt," Garrett argued.

The behavior shocked Seth. From the few combat missions he'd gone on with Garrett, the Hawk always had been the poster child for calm and collected. Then Seth realized that if it were Noah in there, he'd probably be just as worked up.

"This is bullshit," Shane spat as he straightened up. He looked over at Garrett. "You coming?"

Garrett gave a curt nod and the two of them started to march up to the front door, not even worrying about something as silly as taking cover. Seth let out a curse, the others on the mission doing the same thing.

"Have they lost their every loving minds?" Cassie demanded.

"I don't think Shane had one in the first place," Seth replied before he got up and gave chase.

Just as they reached the bottom step, Shane called, "Hey, Jackal, you fat fuck. What did I tell you about pissing me off?"

Seth and the others scrambled to catch up, just as Shane kicked in the front door. An in-human shriek of fear sounded from inside, the noise bringing a sinister smile to Shane's face. He tucked away his gun and pulled out two long daggers instead. "Oh, you really, really ticked me off so I think I'm going to make this one personal."

Garrett followed, only to stop up short at the doorway. He swayed slightly on his feet as he mouthed Owen's name several times. Seth let out a cry of distress as he ran up the steps. What he saw inside ripped his heart to shreds.

They had Owen tied to a chair, thick ropes going all the way up his chest and arms. Blood ran from his face, dripping down to join the already large puddle forming at his feet. Even with his head slumped forward and in the piss-poor lighting, Seth could see that his brother's face was a mangled mess.

Shane had some fat shifter pinned to the ground, the man's screams of pain filling the air. Another shifter stood in front of Owen. In his hand, he held a gun, butt end down, the weapon red with blood. Tall and all muscles, the man looked like he could take out just about anyone. Too bad for him a group of pissed off felines and Hawks were above average when it came to vengeance.

Seth turned to Garrett and ordered, "Take him out and make sure you do it Shane's way."

Garrett nodded once before he advanced. The man took one look at the trouble heading his way and made a run for it. He ducked out a back door and made a dash through the trash-strewn back yard. Garrett took a couple steps, then launched himself into the air. A brief flash of light filled the dreary house as Garrett transformed into a huge Hawk with a wing span so massive it nearly filled the width of the room, he flew through what remained of a sliding glass door and took pursuit. After a few moments, another set of screams ripped through the air.

Seth rushed over to Owen. "It's okay, buddy. We're here now." He started to saw at the ropes. As soon as the ones around his chest were removed, Owen's back arched up with a sickening bone cracking sound. His eyelids shot open and Seth bit back a cry of alarm when he saw the pupils were elongated like a feline.

"Fuck, he's shifting!" Seth yelled.

Andrew and Mitchell rushed forward to help cut away the rest of the bindings. Once they were gone, Seth wrapped his arms around Owen and gently lowered him to the ground. They landed with a clumsy thud, Owen halfway on Seth's lap.

“Shoot me,” Owen grated out in a garbled voice.

It took Seth a moment to realize his brother was actually serious. Then the sounds of bones snapping filled the air and Owen let out a wail of agony and it all made sense to Seth. He smoothed Owen’s sweat-slicked hair back and soothed, “It’ll be okay. You just need to stop fighting the shift.”

“I’m so sorry I fucked up again,” Owen sobbed, tears falling down his swollen face.

“Don’t be. If anyone should be apologizing, it’s me. I should have trusted you and tried harder to understand you better. Now I want you to focus on my voice and I’ll talk you through this.”

“It hurts.”

“It won’t if you just give in to it, I promise.” Seth would have done anything at that moment to spare Owen even one second of suffering. Shit, he would have willingly volunteered to take on all of Owen’s pain if possible.

“Seth, I’m scared.” Owen’s hands shot out and grabbed tightly onto Seth’s arms.

“I know you are, but you’re not alone. I’m with you this time and I promise to protect you.”

“No, I can’t shift.”

Seth reached down and cupped Owen’s face, taking care to be gentle because of his brother’s massive injuries. “You don’t have a choice. If you don’t let go, you’re going to die.”

Owen let out a little whimper. “I don’t know how to do so it doesn’t hurt.”

“Your Tiger does, just let it take over.” When Owen still hesitated, Seth let out a sob of his own. “Please, I can’t lose you again. You mean too much to me.”

Owen let out one last moan before he nodded.

Seth held him closer and began to speak in low tones, giving words of instruction and encouragement. Gradually Owen’s body relaxed and his breathing evened out. Then a bright light flashed and Seth found himself under five hundred pounds of Tiger. Luckily for him, Owen only took that form for a moment before there was another flash and he was back to his human form. It was enough though, because most of the wounds healed up and the only blood on him were the stains on his clothes.

“I knew you could do it,” Seth declared as he pulled Owen into a tight hug.

His heart soared when Owen returned the embrace.

“I didn’t hold my shift for that long,” Owen said, his voice muffled from his face being pressed against Seth’s chest.

“That’s okay, it’s probably because you were injured and your body was weak. We’ll start your training tomorrow and next time you’ll do much better.” Seth wanted to kick himself for agreeing to go on that damn mission a few days ago instead of staying home to work with Owen. If he’d taken the time out to prepare him, then Owen would have been saved so much

pain.

"Thank you," Owen shocked him by whispering.

"For what?"

"For coming and saving me. For helping me shift."

Seth hugged him tighter. "From now on, I'll always be there for you. I'm so sorry for yelling at you and not trusting you."

"I only wanted you to be proud of me."

Tears welled up in Seth's eyes. "I am proud of you, Owen. More than you'll ever know."

For the first time since he'd found Owen, Seth finally believed that they were truly a family.

* * * *

In the chaos that followed the fight, Garrett didn't get a chance to talk to Owen before they took him back to HQ. He knew that he should probably wait until the next day, but as he thought about how close he'd come to losing Owen, all Garrett wanted to do was get to his Tiger so he could hold him tightly in his arms and never let go.

Cassie answered the door, a knowing smile of her face. "I figured it wouldn't be too long before you showed up."

"Where is he?" Garrett asked.

"In his room. Even though he's healed, Doc still ordered some bed rest."

Garrett thanked her and made his way through the house. It didn't go unnoticed that nobody seemed surprised to see him. He returned a few of the greetings, but didn't stop to chat, too intent on getting to Owen.

Once he reached the bedroom, Garrett pushed open the door. Owen lay on his side, his back facing Garrett. His knees were tucked tight to his chest. He must have taken a shower, because all the blood was gone and his normally spiked hair lay flat against his head. Instead of the dirty clothes, he wore a pair of baggy grey sweat pants and a Tony the Tiger shirt that had probably been a gag gift.

Before Owen had a chance to wake up, Garrett kicked off his shoes and climbed into bed. As he snuggled up to Owen's back and wrapped his arms around the man's chest, Garrett finally felt complete for the first time since he woke up to an empty bed.

"Cassie, is that you?" Owen mumbled sleepily.

Outraged, Garrett got up on one elbow to shoot off a glare, only to find Owen grinning at him. "No, but if you want I can call her in here."

Owen shook his head. "I much prefer you."

Garrett brushed his lips over Owen's temple. "Are you sure about that?"

Owen twisted a bit so they were completely facing each other. Giving Garrett a soft look that did funny things to his insides, Owen replied, "I'm very sure."

"Even after how stupid I've been?"

"Hey, we never made any promises to each other." Owen shrugged, but not before Garrett saw the hurt flash over his eyes.

Garrett knew then he had to take a chance. Either he laid his feelings out in the open, or he'd risk losing Owen forever. Taking a deep breath, he said, "Maybe not, but that didn't stop me from falling in love with you."

"The Jackal must have knocked something loose in my head, because I could have sworn that you just said you loved me," Owen countered, his eyes wide.

"You didn't hear wrong." Garrett gave Owen a soft kiss on the lips. "I love you, Owen, and I want you to be my mate."

"Whatever happened to Tigers and Hawks not belonging together?" Owen challenged.

It wasn't an all-out rejection, so Garrett didn't give up hope yet. "I admit, I used to believe that. Then some sexy, punk Tiger came into my life and turned that idea upside down." Garrett gently caressed Owen's cheek. If they lived to be several hundreds of years old, Garrett still wouldn't be tired of touching Owen.

"Then how about all that talk about not wanting to look me in the face while you fucked me?" Owen asked in a small, confused voice.

"What I said may have been true about my past hook ups, but not with you. The reason I didn't dare look into your eyes while we were making love is I was afraid that you'd see the truth."

"What, that you felt sorry for the poor, dumb Tiger?" Owen challenged.

"No, that the Hawk has lost his heart to the Tiger." Garrett swallowed nervously. "You're making me worried here. I've basically told you twice I love you and you haven't told me how you feel."

Owen reached up and cupped Garrett's cheek. "You're stubborn, bossy and have the strangest kink for lederhosen."

A cold sweat broke out over Garrett as he realized he may be in for a letdown. "Please tell me there is a but at the end of that sentence."

Owen gave him the sweetest of grins. "But I can't help it. I love you back."

"Oh, thank God," Garrett breathed as he went in for a harder kiss.

Once they came up for air, Garrett added, "Besides I think you're going to need me. With all the trouble you keep getting into, you need around the clock protection."

"I couldn't think of a better Hawk for the job," Owen laughed as he snuggled into Garrett's chest.

"Good, because now that I have you, I'm never letting go."

"I'm holding you to that," Owen replied.

* * * *

Owen finished feeding the last of his snakes before he stole a quick glance at the clock. Garrett had promised to come by after a hand-to-hand combat training session and Owen only had ten minutes before he was due.

He started to put things away. Already he had a new stack of notebooks that were filling up. He opened one and made a few notes. Just as he was finishing, a soft knock came from his door.

Before he had a chance to answer it, Mitchell came into the room. Even though Owen felt pretty sure he hadn't done anything wrong this time, a jolt of anxiety still went through him. He nervously shot to his feet. "Hello, sir. What brings you down here?"

Mitchell arched a brow at him. "Since we live together I think you can drop the whole sir bit."

A heat came over Owen's face. "Yeah, I guess it is a little much."

"As for why I'm here, it's so I could thank you."

Owen blinked stupidly a few times, not sure his hearing was working correctly. "Thank me? For what?"

"You were right. Doc Featherstone tested your theory and it has been a toxin that's been causing the early shifting. He also agreed with you that it's not an accident, but a direct attack on the felines."

"Wow," Owen breathed. While he'd been pretty certain he'd been on the right track, it still felt damn good to get some validation. "Do you think it's the Ravens?"

"Since they're the ones who hate us the most, I'd say that's a good bet."

"But why would they do it? You would think they would want less felines who could shift out there."

"Think about it, it's the perfect way for them to flush out Lost Shifters. By forcing the shift early, it leaves the felines exposed and vulnerable. I just can't figure out how the Ravens are introducing the toxin to so many shifters."

"That's easy, they're putting it in the drinking water." Owen shrugged. He'd mulled over that question so many times in his head in the past few months and that was the only solution that seemed feasible.

Mitchell crossed his arms over his chest as he appeared to be contemplating that suggestion. "I guess that would make sense. But wouldn't it affect humans, too?"

"No, I tested it and the toxin is completely benign with them," Owen rushed out, excited that Mitchell actually believed him.

Mitchell studied him for a few moments before giving a curt nod. "Okay, I need you to find an antidote."

"Me?" Owen asked as he made the dorky point-to-own-chest gesture.

"Since you were the one who found the toxin in the first place I can't think of a better feline for the job."

Owen allowed himself a moment of self-pride before he replied, "I'll start first thing in the morning."

"Good." Mitchell swept his gaze over the room. "I'm thinking you're going to need some better equipment though, a new computer being the first thing."

"You mean I'm not grounded anymore?" Owen grinned as he resisted the urge to do a small happy dance.

Mitchell pinned him with a serious look. "No, in fact we're all damn lucky to have you. Thanks to you, countless felines are going to be saved unnecessary suffering. The entire coalition is proud of you."

"And I'm proud to be a member of the coalition," Owen countered, shyly. He was, too. Now that he'd found his place, made peace with Seth and had Garrett in his life, Owen knew that he'd truly come home. It felt damn good, too.

About the Author

Stephani Hecht is a happily married mother of two. Born and raised in Michigan, she loves all things about the state, from the frigid winters to the Detroit Red Wings hockey team. You can usually find her snuggled up to her laptop, creating her next book.

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