

The book cover features a dark, moody background. In the upper half, two shirtless men are shown from the chest up. The man on the left is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression, while the man on the right is looking down. Both have well-defined muscles. In the lower half, there are two animals: a white wolf on the left, looking upwards, and a leopard on the right, looking towards the camera. The title 'CARNAL INTENTIONS' is centered over the animals, with 'CARNAL' in white script and 'INTENTIONS' in large red serif letters. Below the title is the subtitle 'The Lost Shifters Series Book 4' in a smaller white font. At the very bottom is the author's name 'STEPHANI HECHT' in large white serif letters.

# CARNAL INTENTIONS

The Lost Shifters Series Book 4

STEPHANI HECHT

During one fateful night of death and loss, twenty years ago, Mitchell lost almost everything he held dear. Not only were his parents murdered, but his younger brothers were kidnapped and thought lost forever. Since then, Mitchell has not only had to lead the felines in rebuilding their society, but he's had to protect them from future attacks. This leaves little time for his own wants and needs.

Being the second born, wolf shifter Dean, has always lived to serve others. He's never disobeyed orders, even when one of them dictated that he had to give up a man he loved. Broken and alone, Dean vowed never to open his heart to another. Then both of their lives are turned upside down when it's discovered that a rogue wolf from Dean's pack is holding one of Mitchell's lost brothers captive.

The men find they have no choice but to work together to save him. That's easier said than done since wolves and felines have never gotten along. That doesn't stop Dean and Mitchell for falling for each other and after one night of passion, things change between them forever. But will duty and honor keep them from their happily ever after? If so, will either man be able to recover from the loss?

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CARNAL INTENTIONS  
LOST SHIFTER SERIES BOOK FOUR

BY

STEPHANIE HECHT

## DEDICATION

*To Mom and Dad*

*Even though the song Tic Tok by Ke\$ha was digitally released in August of 2009, in the book I had to move the date up a few months to accommodate the timeline of the story. I hope the readers understand, because quite honestly, could Noah have sung any other song?*

## CHAPTER ONE

There were times when family was the rock of your foundation. That is, the strength that kept you up during the low moments in your life. The shield that protected your back.

Then there were times when you simply closed your eyes and prayed, please—oh please—that you were adopted. Or, at the very least, you were the milkman's baby so you only shared half of the DNA of the idiots surrounding you.

At the moment, Mitchell was wishing for the later.

While the protective ear-gear Mitchell wore muffled the gunfire that rang through the shooting range, it did little to drown out the noise of his siblings, who, he had to keep reminding himself, he loved. Really, he did...most of the time. Right now, he debated to himself which one to toss out to the Ravens first.

The youngest of their family, Keegan, stood in front of the targets. He wore the same type of protective goggles and ear-gear as everyone else,

but unlike everyone else, he also wore an annoyed grimace.

Another brother, Brent, stood just behind Keegan. His mouth so close to Keegan's covered ear that his chin nearly rested on the smaller man's shoulder. "Try again!" Brent ordered, his usual carefree voice, hard and tense with anger.

"It won't matter because I'll just miss again," Keegan snapped back, his voice just as angry.

"Then we'll just stay here until you get it," Brent replied with a patience he'd just recently learned from his mate, Daniel.

"Or I could just leave after I tell you to bite me," Keegan returned with a snarkiness he'd learned from *his* mate, Carson, even though Keegan could never truly pull off the whole fuck-you attitude that Carson seemed to have honed to a fine art. Keegan just had too much of a sweet side to him to really be much of a jerk.

Still, he was trying Mitchell's patience. He rubbed his throbbing temples and sighed. "Word of advice, kiddo. Never tell a Jaguar shifter to bite you. We usually take you up on the offer, and not in a fun way."

Keegan grumbled something under his breath that not even Mitchell's heightened shifter hearing could pick up, but he did turn back around and aim at the target. As he watched Brent call out more instructions, Mitchell marveled at how

different, yet alike, the pair was.

While they both had the same brown hair with dark speckles running through it, Keegan wore his a bit longer and in a more casual style compared to Brent's shorter, military cut. They both had amber eyes, but Brent's were more jaded from seeing too much, while Keegan's still had an innocence to them. Brent's mind tended to jump from topic to topic, almost as if his brain was afraid of missing something. Keegan had an eidetic memory that never allowed him to overlook any detail, no matter how minute.

Even their build differed—Brent being taller and muscular, while Keegan was shorter and leaner. Of course, that no doubt had to do with Keegan not nearly having as much military training as Brent did. That led to the biggest disparity—while Brent had grown up in the shifter society, Keegan had just recently reentered back into the fold.

When he'd been just a baby, Keegan, his two littermates and Jacyn, one of their other brothers, had been ripped from their family. It had only been recently that Mitchell learned that not only were they alive, but so were hundreds of other kids.

Lost feline shifters, all grown up now, who needed to be found and reunited with their families. As leader of the felines, that task weighed



heavily on Mitchell, too, since he alone bore it—the two ton monkey that had latched onto his back and dug its heels in for the long haul.

Some days it just sucked to be him.

“Why do I have to learn how to shoot anyhow?” Keegan grouched. “It’s not like I’m ever allowed into the field. Hell, Mitchell and Carson won’t even let me leave headquarters. You may as well slap me in a *Garanimals* outfit and make me watch the *Wiggles* while I suck my thumb.”

He emphasized his words with wild gestures of his hands despite the fact he still held a very loaded gun in his grip. Both Brent and Mitchell winced and ducked as the barrel flashed in their direction. Finally, Brent reached out and stayed the weapon. Keegan looked down in surprise before a slight flush came to his face as he shot off a sheepish oopsy-daisy look.

“As interesting as the kiddie outfit would be to see, I think we’ll just stick to the shooting lesson today,” Brent drawled in return. He looked more than a little aggravated and it pleased Mitchell to see Brent on the returning end of this type of headache for once. Before Jacyn and Keegan had come home, it was usually Brent who doled out the frustration and stress.

“I still don’t see why Carson can’t just teach me,” Keegan continued to bitch.

“Because I know most of the lessons Carson

gives you usually end in your bedroom," Brent shot back and snorted in disgust.

Keegan gave a wicked grin. "What's the fun of learning if you don't get a reward in the end?"

"The problem is you two go straight for the reward and skip the learning part," Mitchell said.

"Besides, Carson was the one who asked me to give you shooting lessons," Brent added.

That made Keegan stop as his eyes grew dark with concern. "Why?"

"Because for someone who is as smart as shit, you can't seem to get a grip on even the most basic fundamentals of guns. He's hoping that maybe a new teacher will help it finally stick."

Keegan sighed as he looked down at the weapon. "I just don't like guns, not after seeing what they can do. Why can't I just stick to intel and computers? That's what I'm best at."

"We're under constant threat of attack by the Ravens," Mitchell butted in. "If they were to invade headquarters, I want all felines, be they soldiers or civilians, trained to fight back."

That sobered them all up as his words hung as heavy as the gun smoke. Keegan blanched as all the color drained from his face. "You mean like the night they killed Mom and Dad?"

"More than just our parents died in that attack. We lost nearly half our population that day," Mitchell corrected grimly.

"You were only a couple years older than me," Keegan mused softly. When Mitchell merely nodded, Keegan continued, "Yet, you still had to take over leadership of the felines because Dad died. That must have been so hard."

Brent tensed as he tossed a worried glance Mitchell's way. Of anyone, his brother knew how the change of the conversation affected him. Not only were they littermates, but they'd been through so much that Brent read Mitchell better than anybody. Mitchell cleared his throat uncomfortably. As always, whenever the topic shifted to his skills as a leader, the familiar anxieties nag him. Even after two decades, he still felt as if he didn't come close to being the leader his father was. "I managed because I had help from some of the elders," he finally said gruffly.

"No, you didn't." Keegan shook his head. "I studied our history. I know most of it was left up to you."

"Is there a point to this?" Mitchell suddenly wished he'd never ventured down to the shooting range in the first place. He'd rather face a whole flock of Ravens than go on with this damn discussion.

"I just feel like a total asshat, is all. Here I'm whining about having to learn how to shoot and you had to worry about so much more when you were around my age. I'm sorry for the attitude."

He seemed so earnest and genuine that Mitchell couldn't brush him off like he had so many others. "I'll tell you what, you actually hit any part of the target and we'll call it even."

"Deal!" Keegan beamed and damned if Mitchell didn't smile in return.

Okay, maybe he wouldn't toss Keegan to the Ravens just yet.

\* \* \* \*

Dean shifted uncomfortably in the passenger seat of his brother's Jeep Cherokee. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't settle down. With nerves strung out to the breaking point and apprehension over this damn mission, Dean debated whether to try to talk some sense into Chris or just to wave goodbye and bale out of the moving vehicle.

At that moment, Dean McGrivin was seriously considering the later. To hell with the fact that the speedometer told him they were going eighty miles an hour. He'd rather face a serious case of road rash than what waited ahead of them.

"Tell me again why you think this is a good idea?" he growled as he looked through the window of the Jeep. I-75 whipped by, each minute taking them closer to Flint, Michigan and a confrontation he did not want.

"Do you have any better ideas?" Chris countered in hard, clipped tones.

The man didn't even bother to glance away from the road long enough to give Dean a dirty look. Maybe he thought Dean wasn't good enough for one, or maybe Chris had used them all up before they'd reached the Michigan border and he didn't have it in him to grunt any more out. "You could try going with the full truth, instead of the highly edited version you're planning on using," Dean ventured. "I know you're not even telling me the whole story. Mitchell is going to realize the same thing as soon as you open your mouth."

That finally did earn him a murderous glare, Chris's brown eyes growing dark as he let out an impatient growl. "Are you honestly dumb enough to think the felines are going to willingly help a pack of Wolf shifters out of the kindness of their hearts?"

Dean wondered if perhaps he were dumb because he still didn't get the issue. "Why wouldn't they? We helped out a couple of their kind a few months ago."

"That was different. It was a favor to an old friend."

Now, Dean started to feel really dense because the dilemma continued to elude him. From what he knew so far about this particular coalition of felines and their leader, Mitchell, they would

never turn down someone who needed help. Besides, he and Chris had both known Mitchell for years. "How's it different?"

"We just merely sheltered his kin against some Ravens. We're asking him to commit all his soldiers and military contacts."

Dean clenched his jaw as he stared at his brother. Chris looked the same as always, russet-colored hair that hung just past his collar, sharp amber eyes that never missed anything and a cool don't-fuck-with-me attitude. Every other shifter in their pack would buy the façade, but Dean knew his brother better than anyone and right now he felt certain Chris was upset.

"What aren't you telling me?" he demanded as he carefully studied Chris's fingers. He almost smiled when he saw it. The brief blanching of knuckles as Chris tightened his grip on the steering wheel. Every time Chris got ready to tell a fib, his hands would briefly fidget. It had been that way since they'd been pups.

"Nothing." Again the knuckles whitened.

"Don't lie to me, Chris. If you're going to drag me into the middle of a sticky situation that could very well be full of fangs and claws, the very least you can do is be upfront with me."

After what seemed like an hour's worth of tension, Chris finally admitted, "Adam's pack may be the ones we're going against."

Dean took several deep breaths as he fought the urge to yell. At the moment, things were so tense any screaming might be the spark that ignited the powder keg of aggression. "So, you mean to tell me that not only are you dragging an unwitting Mitchell into a war, but you're going to pit him against the most powerful Wolf shifter pack?"

Chris continued to stare ahead and not say anything.

Dean let out a low curse. "That's fucked up, even for you."

Chris's head whipped to the side, his eyes glaring the way they did whenever someone questioned his authority. "Are you doubting the wisdom of your Alpha?"

*Yeah, every goddamn day.* Not that he could ever admit that aloud though. Not if he didn't want to start an inner pack conflict. "Of course not." Dean made a big show of lowering his gaze.

"Nice try, but I can still smell the anger coming from you. Is there something *you're* not telling *me*?" Chris demanded.

Dean's heart leaped in his chest, which would only give him away more, but he couldn't help it. He fought to get his emotions under control as he lied, "No."

"We've had to do some unsavory things in the past to protect our pack and it never bothered you before. What has you so antsy about this time?"

Now panic set in along with the rage as Dean realized he might have given too much away. "They just have a lot of firepower behind them and I wouldn't want it directed our way if Mitchell gets pissed."

Chris gave a slow nod, but his eyes remained narrowed suspiciously. "We'll just have to make sure he doesn't find out the truth until it's too late."

"I guess." Dean shrugged as he looked out the window.

"How long has it been since we've had a face-to-face with Mitchell?" Chris asked.

*Three years, two hundred and fifty days and twenty hours.* That for sure Dean couldn't say aloud for it would be to damning. "It's been a while."

"A lot has changed since then. From what I hear, he's desperate to find the two brothers who are still missing." Chris snorted, as if he didn't quite get it. Which he probably didn't. No doubt, in his opinion, Mitchell should be fine since he already had one sister and three brothers at home. Why scramble to add even more mouths to feed?

"So, you're going to dangle one of his missing brothers in front of him, like some feline version of a carrot." Dean had to work hard to keep the disgust from his voice.

"It is his biggest weakness."

One that Chris had never had. Despite the fact



they were brothers, he'd never hesitated to throw Dean to the Wolves—pun intended. Dean, on the other hand, would gladly give up his life for Chris. It wasn't just because he was the Alpha either. While Chris took after their father and didn't have a loving side, Dean was more like their mother. She'd always believed in putting family first. Dean paused as he realized he and Mitchell had the same weakness.

As they pulled onto the off-ramp, Chris started to bark orders, "When we get there, keep your yap shut. I'll do all the talking. The last thing I need is you getting emotional and ruining things."

Dean resisted the urge to snap off a sarcastic salute. Instead, he settled for a slight nod. As soon as they reached the turn, they could already see the feline headquarters. From the outside, it looked like one of the many rundown former auto factories that littered Flint. However, the Wolves' intel told them the outside of the building was just a ruse. From what they could gather, the felines had a highly functioning, military operation inside. One that Chris was practically pissing in his pants to use to his advantage.

As they pulled up to the tall, electric gates, two males came from the guard tower. They split up, one of the men going to either side of the car. Chris rolled down his window and nodded at Dean to do the same. As soon as the felines were

close enough, Chris opened his mouth to talk. Before he could get a word out, both he and Dean had guns pointed at their heads.

"What the fuck are you dogs doing sniffing around our territory?" one of the felines demanded. He was short and stocky with dark hair.

"We need to talk to Mitchell." Chris held his hands in the peace gesture.

"Did you call ahead and schedule an appointment?" the second guard asked with false sweetness. He had dark hair, too, but was much taller than the other cat.

"Is he here or not?" Chris demanded, his lip curling up in a show of aggression.

Dean could already tell that the felines weren't going to be cowed by his brother's hard tone though. While he may be the big, bad Alpha back home, here he was just a pesky dog, sniffing in the wrong territory.

"Maybe he is and maybe he's not." The dark-haired guard pushed the barrel of his gun more firmly into Chris's temple. At the same time, two dark figures came from the sky. As they got closer, Dean was shocked to see they were hawks. Not just ordinary ones, but large six foot ones that let him know they were shifters. One landed with a loud thump on the hood, the other on the trunk. As soon as their feet touched the metal, both

transformed into the human side. Dressed head to toe in the same dark camo as the feline shifters, the Hawks had rifles, too. They aimed them at Chris and smiled as they waited for orders. Dean's heart hammered as he realized they were in way over their heads.

"So, I see the rumors about the Hawks joining forces with you guys is true," Chris said calmly as he flicked a dismissive glance at all the firepower directed his way.

Dean felt aghast that his Alpha didn't seem at all concerned about his own safety. Especially when the Hawk on the hood gave him a cool smile as he cocked his gun. The increased danger to his brother made Dean break his ordered silence. "How about Rat? Is he here?"

Rat was their one and only true feline ally. While in the past, the Cheetah had never been one to stick around anywhere for more than a few months, last they heard, Rat had become loyal to Mitchell and had set down roots with the coalition.

"Rat?" the taller one echoed before he made a tscking sound. "You better not let his mate hear you call him that."

"Who's his mate?" Dean gulped, already having a sinking suspicion what the answer would be. *Please, please, please don't let it be Keegan.* The last time Dean had met the kid, he hadn't

exactly gone out of his way to be friendly to the Jaguar.

“Mitchell’s little brother, Keegan.” The feline gave a shit-eating grin, showing how much he loved being the bearer of bad news.

Fuck! Not good, but not surprising. When their wolf pack had helped Rat and Keegan a few months ago, it had already been pretty obvious how close the two were. Come to think of it, at that time, the little brat Jaguar had snarled at Dean for calling Rat by his nickname. Dean scrambled for several heartbeats until he recalled Rat’s birth name. “Carson!” He snapped his fingers, excitedly as it came to him. Everyone turned to give him confused looks, but he ignored them, instead politely requesting, “Can you, please go get Carson for us? He’ll vouch that we come in peace.” Dean wrinkled his nose as he realized that last line sounded like it had come straight from some cheesy alien invasion movie. It did get him the desired reaction though, as one of the guards stepped back and talked into his headset.

When the guard returned a few seconds later, his face wasn’t any kinder. “Pull around to the side and wait by your vehicle. Someone will escort you inside.”

A pitch of fear made Dean’s stomach flip. Somehow, he didn’t think that escort would be of the friendly kind. He cursed under his breath as

he realized once again Chris got them into one hell of a mess and this time, Dean might not be able to dig them out of it.

## CHAPTER TWO

As soon as Keegan hit the target five times in a row, Mitchell finally called an end to the lesson. It took Keegan three hours to catch on and all of them let out a heavy sigh of relief that it was over. While Brent led Keegan through the steps of cleaning his weapon, Mitchell walked closer to the paper target for a better look. While they did have ones in the standard man-shaped outline, they also had some in the form of birds. They used the fowl version with Keegan and Mitchell studied it to see how his little brother would have fared had it been a true Raven.

He let out a slow hiss of disappointment. *Not good at all.* Most of the time, the bullet just barely clipped the outline. Only one shot hit a wing and that had been on the tip of its wingspan. Enough to hurt like hell, maybe slow down the enemy for a bit, but not enough to hold off an attack. They needed to teach Keegan how to make a head or

heart shot and they needed to do it quickly.

Mitchell curled his hands into fists as the now familiar sense of unease settled over him. The one that told him trouble loomed. Call it a sixth sense, or ESP, more likely it just came from years of being at war, but he just knew that something big was heading their way and it would be soon. They were nowhere near ready for it either.

"Can I go now?" Keegan asked once he cleaned the gun to Brent's specifications.

Without turning around, Mitchell nodded. The sounds of pounding footsteps rang through the empty room as Keegan jetted, no doubt beating a direct path to Carson's office.

"He's getting better," Brent remarked as he came over to stand behind Mitchell.

"Not quick enough." Mitchell angrily ripped down the target and tore it in half.

Brent raised a brow at his outburst. While it would have been a small one with anyone else, with Mitchell, it was close to a hissy fit.

Ever since he'd taken on the leadership role, he'd always prided himself on keeping a calm front. While Brent and Cassie had been free to show their emotions and be themselves, Mitchell had forced himself to always be cool and detached. A coalition was only as strong as its leader and he couldn't afford to show even a fissure of weakness. To do so could bring on

another attack, or worse, discord amongst their own kind. If they were ever going to defeat the Ravens, the felines needed all of their strength.

"Is it time to switch you to decaf?" Brent snipped as his gaze lingered on the tattered pieces of paper littering the floor.

"Surprise, asshole, we made that switch years ago just so we could tolerate living with you," Mitchell returned easily. Despite the tension doing the mambo in his gut, it felt somewhat comforting to fall back on the same bullshit banter he'd always shared with Brent. It was the only time he felt like he could be himself.

"You want to talk about what's really bothering you?" Brent toed one of the pieces of paper with his boot. "It can't just be Keegan's crappy aim. He's had that since he was a baby."

Mitchell paused to give Brent a confused look. "How could you possibly know that?"

"One time I changed his diaper and he tried to pee on me and hit Jacyn instead."

"I remember that." Mitchell smiled despite his bad mood.

"So you going to tell me what's going on?" Brent sobered.

"I can't shake the feeling that something big is getting ready to go down," Mitchell admitted.

Brent surprised him by nodding. "I've been getting the same hinky vibe. Things have been



way too quiet. There's been no Raven activity since the last attack on Keegan and Cassie, and that was months ago. It's almost as if they've pulled back to get ready for something. I just wish I knew what that something was."

It came as a relief to Mitchell to realize he wasn't the only one with the ominous feelings. "What do you think it could be?"

"No clue. I just know it's not going to be good or fun. Do you want me to put out more patrols?"

Mitchell shook his head with heavy regret. "I don't have the manpower to spare. Most of them are leaving tomorrow on that mission for the humans."

While Mitchell would love nothing more than to tell the humans and their damn government to take their mission and shove it, he couldn't. The coalition's weapons, vehicles, infirmary, training facilities, even the building itself, were all funded by the money they made from working for the military. The entire livelihood of the coalition depended on it. Even more important, they needed the weapons the humans provided if the felines were going to continue to hold the Ravens at bay.

So, in other words, the military had Mitchell by the short and curlies, and they damn well knew it.

"Wow, don't you look chipper today," a female voice snarked.

Cassie, the one and only sister in their family, came strolling in. She gazed down at the tattered paper and made a tsking noise. "I take it Keegan's lesson didn't go well?"

"He actually managed to hit the target this time. That's a step up from the last time when he nearly shot one of the Lions in the head," Mitchell drawled in a sarcastic tone that sounded more as if it should have come from Brent.

"Is that why it's so deserted in here?" she asked as she cast a glance around the usually busy shooting range.

"Yeah, after that last incident, whenever Keegan comes in here, everyone runs for the doors." Mitchell sighed.

"Ouch! Does that upset him?" She wrinkled her nose. While she may be one of the toughest soldiers in his ranks, she also had a very soft spot where family was concerned.

"Please." Brent rolled his eyes. "Keegan thinks it's funny. There's a reason why he and Carson get along so well. They both love to piss off anyone who comes into contact with them. Carson is just more direct, where Keegan usually likes to slide his jabs in under several layers of charm."

"Speaking of Carson, we have a problem," Cassie announced grimly.

Mitchell closed his eyes in resignation. If he only had a nickel for every time someone tossed

that same exact sentence his way... "What is it?" he asked.

"You remember the Wolf pack that granted him and Keegan sanctuary a few months back when they were on the run from the Ravens?"

"Yeah?"

"The pack leader is here and he wants to speak to you."

His eyes snapped open as adrenaline shot through his body like a drug. "Chris? What's he doing here?" *And more importantly is he alone?*

"I have no clue. He just drove in with his brother, Dean. They're waiting in your office."

Now Mitchell's body really started to hum with anxiety. "So, the two of them just showed up with no explanation?"

Cassie's face twisted up in disgust. "I tried to get the reason out of him, but he insisted on speaking only to you."

The cold sweat that broke out over him had nothing to do with Chris and it took all of Mitchell's control to hide the emotions swirling around inside him. "I guess I should go and see what he has to say then."

As they walked toward the front of the building, Mitchell's mind raced as he tried to think of why Chris would be here. The fact that he'd only come with Dean meant he wanted to show

his visit was to be friendly. If it had been to call a war council or something like that, he'd have brought along several of his pack.

Still, he took a deep breath to steady himself before he opened the door. Even though there were plenty of chairs in his spacious office, both Chris and Dean were standing. Mitchell immediately locked gazes with Chris, meeting him head on, one Alpha to another.

Chris hadn't changed much in the past few years. He still looked hard, his dark hair cut in a slightly scruffy style, clothes pressed to perfection and a cool aura that nearly frosted the air around him. The only time Mitchell had ever seen the guy smile had been when he talked to Carson and then it had still been a rarity.

Mitchell didn't relax until Chris nodded slightly, accepting his Alpha status of the coalition. God, Mitchell hated all this formality, but it seemed to be so damn important to the Wolves, he went along with it. Mitchell nodded back and it was only then Chris lowered his head and stepped back. Once all the stupid posturing was aside, Mitchell finally allowed his gaze to slide in Dean's direction.

He hadn't changed either. The front of his chestnut hair, still hung over his face. The same long lashes framed wide, doe-brown eyes. He even still had the slight unshaven, gruffness about

him. Unlike his brother's more formal attire, Dean wore a pair of black jeans and a light green button-up shirt.

"Watcha doing here?" Brent demanded. He'd never been one to get hung up with formalities.

"Sorry to barge in unexpectedly, but we found something that we thought should be brought to your attention," Chris replied, a little too smoothly. His smile way too innocent to be true.

Mitchell got that nagging feeling again and it set off all his alarm bells. They weren't even two minutes into this meeting and he already knew that Chris had something up his sleeve. Once again, Mitchell glanced over at Dean, hoping that maybe his expression would give a clue, but the Wolf seemed suddenly interested in the laces of his battered combat boots. "Really?" Mitchell cocked his head to the side. "And what would that be?"

Chris held up a flash drive. "I think it would be better if we showed you instead. It's a video."

Somehow, Mitchell didn't think that thing held a slide show of Chris' last vacation to the Grand Canyon. Mitchell exchanged cautious glances with his siblings before he made his next move. "Fine. Brent and Cassie will show you to Carson's office. We can watch it there."

Chris finally showed some real emotion when his lips curled down into a brief frown. He

gestured to a nearby laptop. "Why not just watch it here?"

"Because I want to ensure that the device is clean before I let it even touch any of our software. Carson will make sure to check it out properly."

Chris let out slight hiss of displeasure as the tension in the room ratcheted up ten levels. "After all these years, you don't trust me?"

"I like you, Chris, a lot. However, I *love* my coalition and their safety always comes first. As a leader, I'm sure you understand that?" He'd manipulated Chris into a corner and the whole room knew it.

The Wolf leader still managed a tight smile. "Of course, Dean and I would be happy to take this to Rat right away."

"He goes by Carson now," Mitchell corrected before he threw out his next zinger. "Also, Dean stays here with me for right now."

The tension rose even higher, almost becoming cloying as Chris paused, his eyes narrowing dangerously. "Why?"

"Just want to catch up on old times with him." Mitchell paused, feigning surprise. "You're not worried that I might pry something out of him, are you?" Now he'd more than backed Chris into a corner. He'd all but nailed the fucker's ass to the wall.

Cassie stifled a giggle while Brent all out

grinned. Dean continued to look down, but Mitchell could have sworn he caught the hint of a smile on the Wolf's face.

"Of course I'm not worried," Chris bit out between clenched teeth. Jerking his head at Brent, he snarled, "Let's go."

Nobody said anything as Cassie and Brent led Chris out. Once they were gone and it was just he and Dean, Mitchell went over to the door and checked it to make sure it was locked. Dean looked up from under those long lashes as he swallowed so loudly, Mitchell could hear him from across the room.

"What do you want?" Dean asked, his voice low and even.

Mitchell started to slowly advance. "I want to strip you naked and lick every inch of that beautiful body before I bend it over my desk and fuck you stupid, but I don't think we'll have time for that."

Dean's breath hitched as his eyes became dark and passion infused. "No, I don't think we do. Chris or your family might come back if we take too long. Do you have any other suggestions? Perhaps something that will take only a few minutes?"

Mitchell finally got close enough to touch Dean. Instead of reaching out with his hands though, he arched his body into the man, rubbing against him

like a housecat calling for attention. Mitchell moaned upon contact, his aching cock jerking as the scent of Dean filled his senses. It smelled like deep pine forests, fresh earth and spices. Mitchell closed his eyes and savored it as he thought about how often he'd longed for that scent during the past three years. "The problem is, anything I want to do with you would take more than just a few minutes," Mitchell whispered into Dean's ear before he gave the lobe a playful bite.

Dean moaned as he tipped his head to the side. "Fuck, Mitch, I've missed you so much," he confessed in a ragged voice.

Mitchell fisted his hand in Dean's rough hair and held him tight. With his nose buried in the crook of Dean's neck, Mitchell replied, "I missed you, too, Wolf. Our nightly *Skype* chats haven't been nearly enough."

Dean let out a harsh laugh as he wrapped his arms around Mitchell. "Even though we usually end up jacking off together during those chats?"

"It's no replacement for the real thing."

"No, it's not," Dean agreed with a sad sigh. "Does anyone here know about our computer adventures?"

"I'm pretty sure Carson does since he monitors all the communications going in and out of headquarters, but he's never said anything. How about on your end?"



"No. I've covered my tracks pretty well."

Mitchell hoped Dean was right. If his pack found out he'd been messing around with a feline, all hell would break loose. Not only would Chris have a fit if he discovered his brother was fucking a cat, but Dean could be exiled. "I can't believe I'm actually holding you again." Mitchell had missed Dean so much these past years. Yearned for his touch, to hear his warm voice, the taste of his soft lips—everything about him.

"I can't believe you still haven't found a replacement for me after all this time," Dean said as he ran his hands down to cup Mitchell's ass.

"I told you then that there could never be anyone else for me and that's still true." It hurt though, badly, because they both knew they could never be together. He shuddered when he felt Dean's lips skate across the shell of his ear.

"Are you sure you locked the door?"

When Mitchell nodded, Dean stepped back. With shaky hands, he started to fumble with the fly of Mitchell's pants. Even though he knew he should call a halt to this, Mitchell found himself powerless to speak the words as Dean slowly lowered his zipper and reached in.

"I've really, really missed this," Dean said as he pulled Mitchell's cock free. After giving it a couple gentle strokes, he dropped to his knees in front of Mitchell. Looking up with those sweet eyes of his,

he declared, "I can't wait any longer to taste you."

Mitchell shot a look at the door as concern made his heart skip a beat. While it was locked, that didn't guarantee someone wouldn't knock and demand his attention on some matter. Then the warm heat of Dean's mouth surrounded him and all of Mitchell's concerns evaporated. He even let out a low hiss of pleasure as he threaded his fingers through Dean's hair. This felt so right, there was no way he could stop it.

## CHAPTER THREE

Dean groaned in appreciation at the sweet scent that marked Mitchell. Not quit citrusy, but close. It had a unique blend that never failed to make Dean hard. Hell, who was he kidding? He didn't need the scent to turn him on. Ever since the moment Mitchell had walked into the room, Dean's dick had been like fucking granite.

As he ran his tongue over the tip of Mitchell's cock, he gazed up at the man. Mitchell's usually composed face was a beautiful mask of passion, his brown hair mussed just a bit as his lean body arched forward perfectly. He was every bit as sexy as Dean remembered.

"I don't know how long I'm going to last," Mitchell confessed with a small grin. "The last time someone touched my dick was that night back in Minnesota when we fucked."

That statement caused Dean to pause as his stomach did a strange flip. "You mean you

haven't even had a casual screw in all this time?"

Mitchell's eyes grew soft with emotion, so much so the usual amber color almost seemed to glow. "Not unless you count my own hand."

That humbled Dean more than anything Mitchell had said. Not the hand part, although the image of Mitchell stroking himself was sexy as hell. No, it was the fact that, despite the fact they could never truly be together, Mitchell still cared enough about Dean to stay faithful. Too choked up with emotion to respond, Dean leaned forward to continue with the blowjob, but a tug on his hair made him stop.

"Take your cock out," Mitchell ordered. "I want to see you stroke yourself off while sucking my dick."

Dean growled his approval low in his throat as he obeyed, undoing his pants and pulling out his aching erection. The head was already slick with pre-cum, so he ran his thumb around it, smearing it around to use as lubricant. Starting to stroke himself at a slow steady pace, he wrapped his lips around Mitchell's shaft once again.

"God, you're mouth is so sweet," Mitchell moaned as his hips bucked forward.

Mitchell's cock was leaking pre-cum, too. Dean pulled back long enough to spear his tongue into the slit so he could milk some more out. As soon as the flavor of Mitchell's essence danced over his

taste buds, Dean knew he wasn't going to last much longer.

Determined not to finish before Mitchell, Dean started to suck his cock in earnest, humming so the vibrations added to the sensations. He knew he'd won when Mitchell tugged on his hair and let out a muffled cry. Sure enough, a couple of breaths later, the warm wash of Mitchell's release pulsed into Dean's mouth.

Dean almost whimpered at the taste. After dreaming of this moment for so long, he felt like a starved man given a long deserved meal. As he eagerly took all Mitchell had to offer, Dean's own pleasure crested. Letting out a groan, he spilled over his hand.

Still gasping for air, he let Mitchell's sated cock slip from his lips. Dean moaned softly as his cock pulsed several times before the orgasm finally washed away. Throwing back his head, he cried, "Fuck, I missed you so damn much."

"Then why did you leave me?" Mitchell asked, his voice laced with so much hurt.

Dean had to close his eyes against it. Suddenly feeling somewhat awkward, Dean muttered an apology and rushed into the nearby-attached bathroom to wash his hands and try to compose himself.

Leaning his forehead against the cool glass of the mirror, he chastised himself for coming off as

*needy. Stupid, stupid, stupid! Did you really have to drop to your knees like some backstreet whore the second you were alone with Mitchell? Way to play it cool there, slick. Why don't you just wear a t-shirt that says, Ready, Willing and Able, while you're at it?*

The worst thing about the whole mess was he had to go out and face Mitchell, who obviously still hadn't truly forgiven Dean for picking his pack over their relationship. Damn, this is not how he'd hoped things would work out. Over the past three years, he'd just assumed Mitchell had moved on—found his true mate. Instead, he'd continued to pine over the stupid Wolf that didn't deserve his attention.

While Dean would like nothing more than to hide out in the bathroom for the rest of his life, somehow he knew others would find that behavior a tad odd. The last thing he wanted was to have to explain to Chris why he'd decided to barricade himself in the commode instead of helping negotiate this clusterfuck of an alliance. Giving his face one splash of cold water, he took a deep breath to steady his nerves, then ventured out.

As soon as he opened the door, Mitchell was on him. Grabbing Dean by the front of his shirt, Mitchell pinned him against the wall and captured his mouth in a heated kiss. Despite his misgivings and the heavy dose of guilt still clawing at his gut,

Dean immediately melted, opening his mouth so he could thrust his tongue out to stroke and tease.

*Fuck, I care for him so much. I always have and I always will. When I have to leave, it's going to destroy me all over again. Worse yet, when Mitchell finds out the games Chris is playing with him, he's going to hate me for not telling him everything. That will kill me quicker than anything.*

Mitchell broke the kiss, but didn't pull back. Instead, he tipped his face down so their foreheads pressed together. As the warmth of Mitchell's body seeped into him, Dean inhaled deep, wanting to burn the Jaguar's scent into his memory forever. The moment felt even more intimate as their panting breaths mingled. Dean knew that if he lived to be two hundred, he'd never forget it.

"Promise me you'll be careful with Chris," Dean whispered. He wished with all his heart that he could just tell Mitchell everything, but years of thinking of his pack first and always obeying his Alpha held him back.

"Why do I get the feeling there is a whole bunch of unspoken words behind that warning?" Mitchell asked as he fanned his thumb over Dean's bottom lip.

"I wish..." Dean trailed off, realizing he'd already said too much.

Thankfully, Mitchell didn't push the issue.

Instead, he pressed a kiss to Dean's temple. "I understand, Wolf. You're only obeying orders."

Fuck! Mitchell's easy acceptance cut Dean more than a yelling match ever could. "We should probably get moving before the others start to suspect something." Dean sighed regretfully, even though he wanted nothing more than to linger. For all he knew, this would be the only opportunity he and Mitchell had to be alone.

"Just so you know, I don't regret anything," Mitchell said earnestly. "I don't regret agreeing to go on that mission with you three years ago. No more than I regret everything that happened between us. In fact, I thank God every day for it, because without all that, I would have never known what real happiness feels like."

"*Happiness?*" Dean echoed bitterly. "Because of all this you've gone without any love or companionship. If I hadn't interrupted your life, you probably would have found a mate among your own kind."

Mitchell kissed him softly. "Don't you see? You didn't interrupt my life, you made it worth living again. I'll take whatever I can, so long as I can have just a little bit of you. I know that probably makes me sound needy and desperate, but it's the truth."

It felt like someone had punched Dean in his stomach as he thought about what he'd ever done



to be so worthy of someone like Mitchell. And Mitchell was damn worthy. Not because he was the leader of the felines, or because he was a great soldier. No, Mitchell was worthy because he was...well, Mitchell. Never before had Dean known someone so good, pure and willing to trust those he cared about. And Chris was going to take advantage of those attributes, too. Dean had to swallow hard against the self-loathing and nausea that burned a path up his throat.

A loud banging broke the mood. Even though the door remained closed, he and Mitchell still jumped apart guiltily before Dean retreated several steps. A slight flush covered Mitchell's high cheekbones as he went over to answer the door. As he opened it, Brent nearly bowled him over in his rush to get in.

"Mitchell, you need to come to Carson's office right away," Brent said so quickly the words nearly tumbled together.

"Whoa, take a deep breath and tell me what's going on?" Mitchell said calmly.

Dean could sense the underlying concern on Mitchell's face though. Not surprising since even Dean knew it took a lot to get Brent this worked up. He closed his eyes as an even stronger sense of guilt slammed into him. He knew damn well what had Brent so upset. He'd seen what was on the flash drive and once Mitchell saw it, all of their

lives were going to a headlong dive into the crapper.

\* \* \* \*

In the past couple of decades, Mitchell had seen some really fucked up situations and in nearly every one of them, Brent had been by his side. So it took something big to shake either of them. Mitchell could think of only one thing that could rile Brent up this much—whatever had been on that damn drive had to do with one of their two still missing brothers. “Is it Joel or Andy?” he asked as he fought hard to keep his face free from emotion. Not an easy task, given it felt like his heart was being chewed out of his chest.

Brent pressed his lips together in a grim line and shook his head. “We’re not for sure. Keegan thinks it may be Joel, but he’s not positive. It’s a couple of videos and the quality is kind of shitty on both of them. He’s got black hair in them, but I know he’s ours.”

Mitchell felt a sense of betrayal that Dean hadn’t at least given him some sort of inkling about this. Unless, maybe he’d been in the dark about all this, too. Mitchell glanced over at the Wolf and all hope of that being true fled.

Dean looked both sick and guilty at the same time.

Damn, he'd known all along. Mitchell tried not to get angry. After all, not ten minutes ago, he'd told Dean he understood his need to keep pack secrets. However, there were secrets and then there were life or death bombshells, and this definitely fell into the latter. "Okay, let's go to Carson's office and see them," Mitchell said tightly.

"You should know the second one is bad." Brent took in a shuddering breath.

That finally pushed Mitchell over the edge, he turned on Dean. "Have you watched them?"

Dean shook his head, his face paling. "No. I only knew about the first one. Chris never told me about a second video. I swear it to you."

Mitchell wanted to believe it, but with him still feeling the sting of Dean holding back information, it was hard. Instead of responding to Dean's comment, Mitchell spun around and walked out of the room.

Carson's office was just a few doors down and Mitchell made good time because he went at a near run. Even if Mitchell hadn't already known it would be bad, the faces of the others would have clued him in.

Keegan sat in a curled ball, his knees to his chest. While there were no tears, his eyes had a wide-eyed, haunted look about them.

Carson leaned forward in his chair, whispering

soothing words as he stroked Keegan's back. Carson's face had a sickly, pale pallor about it, making it stand out more starkly against his dyed black hair and kohl rimmed eyes than usual.

Cassie paced the crowded room, her eyes glinting with fury as she muttered under her breath. Her small hands balled into tight fists, it looked like she was just looking for an excuse to use them.

Jacyn must have come straight from his shift at the infirmary because he still wore his dark blue scrubs. While he usually served as the balm in the family's chaos, at that moment, he looked as angry as Cassie. His mate, Logan, stood by him. The taller man had a hand on Jacyn's shoulder.

Brent immediately went over to his own mate, Daniel, who pressed a kiss to Brent's temple and whispered something in his ear. After he finished, Daniel glanced up at Mitchell and gave a slight nod to show he would be there to support not only Brent, but his mate's family, too. The gesture gave Mitchell a small dose of comfort. As Mitchell led the felines, Daniel led the Hawks and it soothed Mitchell some to have the man standing in his corner. It would be good to have some backup when he tangled with Chris. He also had no doubt that he and the Wolf leader would be facing off, if not with fists, then with their wits.

*Promise me you'll be careful with Chris. That*

whispered warning from Dean kept replaying in Mitchell's head. "Carson, can you replay the videos for me?" Mitchell asked as he reached over and slightly ruffled Keegan's hair.

"Sure, thing." Carson reached for the main keyboard, then paused as he cast a worried glance Keegan's way. "Why don't you go take a walk, Cub? There's no reason for you to have to go through it again."

Keegan didn't move an inch. "No, I'll stay. It's the least I can do for him. It's not like I don't already have every detail of that damn thing burned into my brain anyway."

Carson looked like he wanted to argue, but in the end, he nodded and went back to the keyboard. After a few clicks, a grainy image came up on several of the monitors.

Mitchell tilted his head to the side in confusion. "Is this *YouTube*?"

"Yeah, that's where they posted the first video," Chris replied.

"*They*?" Mitchell watched the screen as a guy who wore more black than even Carson, started belting out a vaguely familiar song. He was in front of some backdrop that looked like it was nothing more than a red sheet tacked to the wall and the production quality left a lot to be desired. Despite all that, the number of hits the video had staggered him. "What's he singing?" he asked as

he watched the male dancing—if what he did could be called dancing. It looked more like a live sex show with clothes on. He had moves that would put make a stripper blush.

“*Tik Tok* by Ke\$ha,” Keegan supplied before he gave a watery smile. “He has a good voice, I’ll give him that.”

Soon, another young looking male came on the screen. Instead of joining in on the singing, however, he started to rub and caress the dark-haired performer, his hand even sliding up the singer’s tight t-shirt for some skin-on-skin exploration.

“Is anyone going to tell me who these kids are?” Mitchell demanded.

“As much as we can tell, they’re a group of stray shifters who somehow found each other. I’ve had some of my best guys on it and they think there is at least one Wolf, a Hawk, plus a—”

“Jaguar,” Mitchell cut in. A third dancer had joined in on the video and the show was getting more X-rated by the second. Mitchell hardly noticed because he continued to be fixated on the singer. Even though his hair was dark and he looked smaller than even Keegan, Mitchell recognized him instantly. He had no doubt in his mind it was Joel.

“What I can’t believe is *YouTube* didn’t take this down. It’s pretty raunchy,” Brent said.

As if on cue, the on-screen Hawk shifter, slid his hand down the front of Joel's skintight jeans.

"They did, but not before we managed to copy it," Chris informed.

"What interest would your pack have in a group of strays?" Brent asked.

Mitchell silently applauded his brother for getting right to the meat of the situation.

"You see the one who's standing to the side, looking kind of annoyed at the whole thing?"

"Kind of hard to miss him."

"His name is Ranger and he's my oldest sister's son. I promised her I would bring him home." Chris' voice was oddly devoid of any emotion while he made that declaration. Almost as if he could really give a damn about the kid's welfare. "When I saw the feline, I thought that maybe he might be one of your missing shifters."

"It's Joel," Mitchell said, his heart squeezing painfully in his chest as he watched the video end.

"Are you sure?" Cassie asked.

"Yeah."

"How can you be so certain? He doesn't really look like any of us. Plus, he seems younger than twenty-three which is how old he'd be if he was Keegan's littermate." Jacyn leaned back into Logan's chest.

The thing was, Mitchell didn't know how to explain how he was so certain. He just was. So,

instead, he replied, "It's my job to know." Something else bothered him. "How could they've been so stupid as to post something like this on a public site? Didn't they realize other shifters would be able to figure out who they were?" Panic and a little bit of anger pulsed through Mitchell as he thought about all the predators out there who would love to get their hands on a group of young, naive shifters. Not just the Ravens either. All kinds of lechers were out there who would love to take advantage of this situation.

"That's the reason I'm here," Chris said grimly. "Someone did figure out who they were and now those idiots are in a world of hurt."

"Let me guess? That's what the second video shows?" Mitchell felt his stomach drop as he thought of all the different types of danger Joel could be in. *Fuck! I failed him again. If only I had found him sooner. Then he'd be safe here and with us where he belongs.* He looked over at Dean and was stunned to see the Wolf's eyes bright with sorrow and compassion. At that moment, Mitchell would have given anything to be able to take comfort in his arms, to be able to lean on Dean for support, similar to Jacyn taking solace in Logan.

That could never happen, though and Mitchell needed to stop wasting energy on wanting the unattainable. Clenching the back of Keegan's chair, he ordered, "Play the next video."



## CHAPTER FOUR

The next video popped on the screen. Unlike before, there was no cheery backdrop. Instead, it showed Joel on his knees, head hanging down, hands cuffed behind his back. This camera shot was closer and the lack of happiness in his expression made Joel look older than before. Mitchell took inventory of the surroundings, hoping to get some sort of a clue to where he might be.

There were no windows, so he couldn't tell if it were day or night. A stained concrete floor was visible under the knees of Joel's dirty, ripped jeans, so maybe they were keeping him underground. The lighting appeared to be harsh, as if it came from a bare bulb. The walls looked to be concrete as well. Mitchell's stomach churned as he noted a fair amount of blood spattered on the gray stone.

"Joel, why don't you turn and give the camera a

smile?" an unseen voice commanded.

Joel weakly shook his head. "I'm not Joel. My name's Noah."

A hand came into view, the fingers cruelly pinching Joel's cheeks and forcing him to face the camera.

Mitchell's breath hitched when he saw Joel's black eyes, split lips and swollen jaw. The worse of it though had to be Joel's vacant, dazed gaze. "Is he drugged?" Mitchell asked nobody in particular.

Jacyn answered, "Judging by his blown pupils and slow reaction time, my best guess would be some kind of opiate. It would have to be a damn strong one to affect Joel that much, too. Our systems are more resistant to that kind of stuff."

The disembodied voice on the video spoke up again, "You can't hide who you are. Even with that dark hair, you're a spitting image of Mitchell."

"*Mitchell?*" Joel echoed his voice slurred. "Who the fuck is that?"

"Your brother." The hand shifted from Joel's cheeks and moved to his hair.

"No brother. It's just me." Joel let out a surprised cry when the hand roughly tugged his hair.

"You're so stupid, it's almost cute. You do have a brother and he's a very powerful pussycat. So

much so, people are going to want to own your ass in the worst way. I can't wait to see the frenzy you cause on the bidding floor. Especially once they see the little show you're about to give." The speaker finally came into view as he moved in close to stand directly in front of Joel.

"A fucking Raven. I should have known," Mitchell snarled. There was no mistaking the dark, greasy hair and pasty skin that all those bastards seemed to have.

Joel's swollen-eyed gaze shifted to the camera as he let out a little whimper. "Please, don't do this."

That earned him another hair tugging. The Raven held tight with one hand while he used the other to start undoing his own pants. "Oh, that's good. You playing shy when we all know you've sucked more than your fair share of cock. All I'm asking is you give a little demonstration of how talented that sweet mouth of yours is. That way I can send this video to some parties who may be interested in adding a Jaguar to their collections."

"I don't want to, please," Joel begged, his breath hitching.

Mitchell had never felt so helpless—so powerless in his life. Behind him, he could hear Cassie's soft sobs. Strong, proud Cassie, who never cried. For a second, Mitchell wished he could join her and sob, too.

On screen, the Raven backhanded Joel. "You're going to do it though, aren't you? Because if you refuse, who will end up getting hurt?"

Joel struggled back to his knees, a thick line of blood dripping from his mouth. "Ranger."

Dean sucked his breath in at the sound of his nephew's name.

"That's right. Every time you piss me off, I'll take it out on Ranger. Now, you're going to suck my cock and if you bite me or do a piss poor job, I'll slowly pull every one of Ranger's teeth out with a pair of rusty pliers. Now nod if you're going to be a good boy."

Joel nodded, his movements jerky. His breaths started to come out ragged, his eyes watering, but he never full-out cried.

Mitchell didn't know if that made him proud, or broke his heart even more. *If Joel truly was some naive kid, then he should be sobbing and a mess. Yet despite a few pleas and whimpers, he's remained stoic – too stoic. What else has he gone through?* Unable to watch any longer Mitchell turned away and whispered, "Turn it off."

Right before the screen went blank, the sound of a rasping zipper filled the room, the noise sickeningly obscene. Mitchell took several deep breaths as he fought back the wave of nausea threatening to overwhelm him. He would not allow himself to break down. Yes, he could curse,

yell and then punch a few walls, but all that would have to wait for later when he was alone.

He owed it to Joel to keep it together—to make things right. Mitchell would do that, too. He would find out where Joel was, rescue him and then they would wreak havoc on the sons of bitches who'd hurt him. By the time Mitchell was done with them, they'd be nothing more than ashes. Their destruction would serve as a warning to anyone else who dared to touch those he cared about.

He was so caught up in his plans of retribution that he jumped when a hand touched the small of his back. Turning, he found himself locked in Cassie's all-too-knowing gaze.

"I know you'll get him back. I have faith in you," she said before resting her head on his shoulder.

He put an arm around her thin, yet muscular shoulders and gave a tight squeeze. Not letting go, he turned his attention to Chris. "How did you manage to find out about the second video?"

Chris curled his lips up in disgust. "Like the fucking bird said, he sent them out to potential investors. One of them happened to be an exiled member of my pack. The guy always had a soft spot for Ranger, so he turned it over to me."

"And you just decided to share and came to us out of the goodness of your heart?" Brent grunted,

his voice laced with distrust.

Mitchell nearly grinned. There were times where Brent having no diplomacy or internal monologue came in handy.

Chris' eyes grew stormy, but otherwise, he didn't react to Brent's snarky attitude. "I thought that since we both had a vested interest, we could work together to get our kin back," Chris replied.

"You mean if you had our weapons and technology," Keegan piped up. "As I recall from the time I visited your pack, you didn't have anywhere near the firepower we do."

"Let's not split hairs, pup. The only reason you were at my pack is because we gave you sanctuary. We got attacked by the Ravens for doing so, too," Chris spat.

"I already showed my appreciation for that when I sent you a shipment of arms," Mitchell cut in.

Carson finally spoke up. "Really, Chris? Here I thought you helped me and Keegan because you and I were friends."

Chris clenched his jaws together so tight, Mitchell half-expected him to chip a tooth. "Look, do you want our help or not?"

"What can you add to this mission aside from parvo and fleas?" Carson snipped.

"We know the location of the auction."

The room grew silent as the ramifications of

Chris' bombshell hit them. Mitchell recovered first. "Where is it?"

"Some old rundown church in Pontiac."

"That's less than an hour's drive from here," Cassie exclaimed.

"Pretty ballsy of them to hold it so close to our headquarters." Keegan slowly shook his head.

Yeah, it was and that made Mitchell more nervous than ever. Either they were dealing with someone who was dumb or strong enough not to consider the felines a threat. Neither of which bode well for Joel.

"As far as we can tell, this group deals mostly in the slave market. Capturing stray shifters and selling them off to whoever offers the most money."

"What are they?" Mitchell demanded.

Chris narrowed his eyes. "I don't quit follow."

"The slave dealers, what kind of shifters are they? I know Ravens and they usually like to use other breeds to do their grunt work."

"Oh..." Chris paused, as if weighing his options. "We think they're Wolves, but an inferior pack. We have reason to believe that one of the ringleaders is an old, low-ranking member of my pack."

Mitchell would bet his best gun that Chris was lying to him—not about them being Wolves, but about them being low on the food chain. To run an

operation like this, they would need money and power, neither of which a bottom feeding pack would have. Once again, Dean's warning rang through Mitchell's head. "Yet another exiled member? You seem to have a lot of those?"

Chris shrugged. "You know how it goes...everyone wants to be top dog, and I can't allow that."

No, actually Mitchell didn't know. Since he'd taken over the coalition, he'd never been challenged.

"What are we going to do?" Brent asked Mitchell.

"We track the bastards, get Joel back and then burn that entire operation to the ground," Mitchell replied with a low growl.

"What about the military mission we're supposed to go on tomorrow?"

Daniel stepped forward. "Why don't you let me and my Hawks take care of that for you? We've been working under you long enough to be able to pull off a mission on our own."

"We can't ask that of you," Mitchell hedged, even though the offer was damn tempting.

"Please, it's the least we can do after how much you've helped us."

Mitchell let out a sigh of relief. "Thanks, that means a lot."

"All I ask is that you rescue the Hawk shifter



who was in the video with Joel. We can put him with one of our families."

Mitchell nodded. "Consider it done."

"So now that's taken care of, what's our plan?" Cassie demanded.

He pointed at the now empty screen. "Carson, I want you to go over the second video and try to gleam whatever information you can from it. I need to know everything. I don't care how small or insignificant it may seem."

"You got it. I'll also try to scour through the human records and see if I can find out anything more about Joel. I know we didn't come up with anything before, but if I look under the name Noah, I may get lucky," Carson replied, already typing on the keyboard.

Chris cleared his throat. "I need to go to the head council and file a grievance against the Wolf holding Ranger and Joel. Without their consent, I can't legally take action."

"Why not?" Keegan wrinkled his nose in confusion.

Carson answered, "All the Wolf packs have to answer to one governing council of elders. Unlike us, Wolves can't so much as lick their own balls without permission."

Chris growled low in his throat. "Keep it up, Rat, and I'm going to forget that we're friends."

"Call him that name again and I'm going to

forget that we're supposed to be on the same side," Keegan snarled, his eyes briefly flickering into Jaguar form.

Mitchell reached over and put a hand on Keegan's shoulder in a silent order for calm.

Keegan relaxed a bit, but not before letting out another snarl.

"Fine, go and get permission, but we're going to start the search right away," Mitchell said.

Chris hesitated for a second before blurting, "It would be best if you sent a feline emissary with me. The council would be more willing to rule in my favor if they knew the felines had a vested interest in the situation."

Mitchell weighed his options before he looked down at Cassie. "You up for a road trip?"

"You know I am," Cassie replied without hesitation.

That finally got a full-fledged reaction from Chris. His mouth opened and closed a couple of times before he sputtered, "You can't send her."

"Why not?" Mitchell challenged.

"Because she's a female."

The air got silent with an oh-no-he-didn't vibe before Carson let out a low whistle. "Dude, you just signed your own death warrant with that comment and it won't be Mitchell who delivers."

"Oh, really? Are you trying to tell me I need to be concerned about her?" Chris scoffed as he

flicked a dismissive glance Cassie's way.

Even other male in the room took one collective step away from Chris so they would be as far away from ground zero when Cassie finally did get mad enough to attack.

"What's up with the attitude? You've seen me in fights before." Cassie put her hands on her hips and squared off against Chris.

"No, I haven't. In fact, I can't recall ever seeing you in battle," Chris replied, refusing to back down. "But then, you're so tiny I probably just lost sight of you in the crowd. Or maybe you were hiding behind Mitchell or Brent."

Keegan let out a muffled cry of shock as his eyes grew huge. "Cassie is so going to make you pay for that comment."

"I'll make sure to wear ankle guards then, for when she attacks," Chris drawled.

"Damn, Chris, you just don't know when to give up. She's going to chew you up and pick her teeth with your bones," Carson said as he shot off a cheeky grin.

Mitchell silently agreed with Carson. Cassie may be small, but she could easily take down opponents twice her size. Mitchell issued his next order. "Jacyn and Logan will go, too, for backup support."

"Backup for whom, Cassie or Chris?" Carson snorted.

"Chris, of course. Someone has to be there to protect him the next time he insults Cassie," Mitchell couldn't resist answering.

"I don't need any help with that. Dean has my back," Chris snapped.

"Not this time because he's staying here with me until you return." Mitchell almost lost it, and grinned when Chris did that open and close fish-mouth thing again.

"What in the hell are you talking about?"

"You honestly don't think I'm going to let my brother and sister go off with you without having some insurance of our own do you?"

Chris' face grew red with fury. "I thought we were allies."

"We are, but that doesn't mean I trust you worth shit. I know that you wouldn't hesitate to sell us out if your pack's safety depended on it."

"How dare you even—"

"Don't get your hackles up, Chris. It's what makes you a great leader. It just also makes you a poor ally. You don't need to worry. You have my word that Dean will be perfectly safe here." Mitchell didn't add that he'd rather slit his own throat than ever hurt Dean even in the slightest.

"I'll be okay," Dean assured, entering the conversation for the first time since they came into the room.

Chris still didn't relax, his gaze darting from

Dean to Mitchell and then back to Dean again. Chris' gaze narrowed as he seemed to send a silent make-sure-you-keep-your-trap-shut message to Dean.

Mitchell was disgusted to realize the Wolf seemed more concerned about Dean sharing pack secrets than he was about his younger brother's safety. "How long do you think it will take you?" Mitchell asked Chris.

"It'll take half a day to drive there and then we'll have to wait until the council agrees to see us," Chris said as he continued to glare at Dean.

Dean lowered his eyes, but not before Mitchell caught the glint of anger in them. While Dean may be playing the good obedient soldier role, it seemed obvious he didn't like it. "Just so you understand, permission or not, we're going in guns blazing once we know for sure where Joel is," Mitchell warned.

Chris finally looked his way. "I didn't expect any different from you. Everyone knows that family is everything to you."

If Mitchell hadn't of known better, he could have sworn there was an underlying threat under that statement.

## CHAPTER FIVE

By the time the meeting finished and Dean ran back out to the car to get his belongings, night had fallen. Tired and hungry, he shouldered his bag as he followed Mitchell to the apartment in the back of the sprawling building.

Dean still was in awe at the sheer amount of technology and gizmos that surrounded him. The felines had a fully functioning military operation that would rival anything the human government possessed. It made Dean painfully aware of how ill equipped their Wolf pack really was.

Mitchell claimed that only his family lived on the premises, but the place seemed full as felines and Hawks rushed around, doing various duties. Some dressed in uniforms, but just as many of them were in civilian and medical outfits.

While it seemed very efficient, it also had a cold, clinical atmosphere. Back home, the entire pack lived in one building, from the youngest

children to the elderly. Here, the only ones he ran into were adults and they all seemed to have a purpose for being there. Even when they passed by the cafeteria, it didn't have the same, family feeling as Dean was accustomed to. "Aren't there any kids?" he finally asked.

"For security reasons, our school is at a different location," Mitchell explained as he started up a long staircase.

Dean followed. "But don't you miss the sounds of children laughing and playing?"

"Nah. You forget, I live with Carson and Brent, so I get my fill of adolescent behavior." Mitchell grinned, but the humor didn't quite reach his eyes. Ever since the damn video, the Jaguar had taken on a whole sad, haunted look.

At that moment, Dean hated Chris for the stupid game he insisted on playing.

Mitchell opened the door, then gestured for Dean to go in.

Dean let out a small gasp of shock. "You guys call this an apartment?" The place had to be bigger than most mansions and it looked just as classy as one, too. Hardwood floors contrasted perfectly with warm earth toned walls. The massive living room had several heavy, expensive looking pieces of furniture in it and a big screen TV. The dining room was just as large, a long oak table running up the center. Dean shook his head when he saw

the amount of chairs surrounding it. "How many are living here?"

Mitchell paused as he cocked his head. "Shoot, I lost count. There's me, Brent, Daniel, Cassie, Jacyn, Logan, Keegan and Carson. Plus, we have chairs set up for when Joel and Andy come home."

"Damn, no wonder you had to make the place so big."

"You should be right at home here, coming from a pack life. I noticed how uncomfortable you seemed out in the main part of headquarters." Mitchell led him down a hallway that had several doors on each side.

Dean cringed. "I was that obvious?"

"Only to me and that's because I know you so well." Mitchell paused at a door. "You can take this room while you're here."

Since they were the only ones in the apartment, Dean allowed himself to step in close to Mitchell. "Where's your room?"

A sly smile played on Mitchell's lips. "Right next door."

"How convenient is that?" Dean moved in another couple of inches. He couldn't publically offer the same support that Brent and Keegan had received from their mates. Now that they were alone, however, Dean hoped to give Mitchell at least a small measure of comfort. It was the least



he could do and if they both ended up enjoying said comfort, all the better.

Mitchell reached out and hooked his fingers in the belt loops of Dean's pants. "I figured after being so far apart from each other for so long, we deserved a reprieve."

"Won't your family notice?" Dean allowed Mitchell to tug him so their chests were flush together.

"Not unless you get carried away and scream in pleasure while I'm fucking you." Mitchell's eyes glinted with wicked intent.

Dean's knees almost gave out from under him. How he loved when Mitchell looked at him that way, as if starved and Dean were the main course of a fine meal. "You could always gag me," he replied, his voice a hoarse whisper.

"Hmm...that does sound interesting. You would look so hot all bound up, gagged and at my mercy." Mitchell ran the tip of his tongue along Dean's jaw.

Dean shuddered in passion. "When is everyone coming home?"

"Not for a while, yet. Cassie and Jacyn are getting ready to leave, while Carson and Keegan are still tracking down leads." Mitchell started to do that whole full-body-rub thing again. It was something all felines instinctively did when they were aroused.

It never failed to set Dean off, too. "So does that mean you can show me where my bed is?" Dean asked breathlessly as he thrust against Mitchell.

Mitchell answered him by opening the door and pulling Dean in. As soon as they crossed the threshold, they both started to tear at each other's clothes.

Dean paused long enough to kick the door behind them, before he was on Mitchell again, his hands shaking in anticipation. "Do you have lube?" Dean asked between kisses. Truthfully, he'd take it raw if he had to, just so long as he got Mitchell's cock inside him.

"In my pocket," Mitchell replied as he jerked Dean's shirt over his head. Once he tossed it to the side, Mitchell started to rain hot kisses down Dean's chest.

Dean had already undone Mitchell's pants so he had the perfect opportunity to reach in and grab the man's cock.

Mitchell let out a slow hiss. "That's not my pocket."

"I know. I just couldn't resist." Using his free hand, Dean grabbed the small tube of lubricant and then tossed it on the bed. He started to drop to his knees, but Mitchell reached out and grabbed him by the shoulder to stop him.

"Last time was all about me. Let me pleasure you instead."

Overwhelmed with emotion, Dean nodded. Mitchell put a hand in the center of his chest and pushed, making Dean back peddle to edge of the bed. There, Mitchell finished undressing him, even going so far as to crouch down so he could unlace Dean's boots.

Once Dean had lost all his clothes, Mitchell urged him back onto the mattress. Mitchell got undressed, too, before he climbed onto the bed and slowly crawled up Dean's body.

Dean sucked in a breath, his arousal nearly peaking as he stared down at Mitchell. Up this close, Dean could make out all the different shades of brown in Mitchell's hair and he couldn't resist reaching out to run his fingers through it. Mitchell leaned into the touch, a rumbling purr filling the room. "I'd nearly forgotten how much I like the sounds of that," Dean groaned as Mitchell briefly tongued his cock.

Mitchell continued to lick and tease for several minutes, not quite giving a true blowjob. Dean balled his hands into the sheets as he endured the sweet torture. Then he felt it. A cool slick finger playing at his hole. A short laugh burst from his lips. "I didn't even see you pick up the lube again."

"To be fair, you're a little distracted." Mitchell looked up long enough to give a slow, lazy smile.

He started to nip at Dean's hipbone and that

finally proved to be too much. With a gasp, Dean asked, "Are you going to suck me or not?"

"Well, since you asked so nicely, I guess I can." Mitchell parted his lips and took Dean in. At the same time, he slid two fingers up Dean's ass.

"Fuck, that feels so good," Dean cried as he thrust up into Mitchell's hot mouth. Mitchell started to purr again, the vibrations sending ripples of pleasure down Dean's shaft. Never before had he felt such intense bliss. As Mitchell started to really get to work, Dean began to babble. He was sure to be embarrassed later by some of the endearments and pleas that slipped past his lips, but at moment, he felt powerless to stop them.

Just as he was reaching the climax of his pleasure, Mitchell pulled back. Dean let out a whimper of protest until he felt the head of Mitchell's cock pressing into his hole. Dean went all slut, spreading his legs wider and forcing his body to relax around Mitchell's dick.

"I haven't been the same since you left me," Mitchell declared before he thrust all the way in.

Dean bit his bottom lip to keep from crying out loudly as pleasure mixed with beautiful pain. It had been so long since something other than his own fingers had been in the tight passage that at first his body protested the intrusion. Soon though, the ache subsided and Dean found

himself lifting his hips up in a silent plea for more.

Mitchell responded, moving slowly at first, then picking up speed, as they both got lost to the passion. Sweat coated their bodies, making them slippery, but in a good way. It made for the perfect friction against Dean's cock as it pressed between their stomachs.

Mitchell let out a small snarl as he got on his knees and grabbed Dean's hips. The new position changed the directions of the thrusts perfectly, making it so Mitchell's cock rubbed against Dean's special spot.

Pleasure shot through Dean, making him almost forget the need to be quiet. Desperate, he bit the back of his own arm to keep in his groans. Mitchell impatiently pushed it away and replaced it with his lips so he could swallow Dean's cries.

Dean's cock jerked right before it shot off hot ribbons of cum. Dean could feel Mitchell's triumphant smile right before he climaxed, too.

"Mine," Mitchell declared with one final thrust. "No matter what, you'll always belong to me."

While the claim of ownership scared the hell out of Dean, it also made him want to hold on tight to Mitchell and never let go. As Mitchell collapsed on top of him, Dean found himself wishing, not for the first time, that he could truly be Mitchell's mate. He'd seen the way Keegan and Carson had looked at each other, how they could

be openly affectionate with each other. At that moment, Dean would have killed to have that with Mitchell.

"I missed you so fucking much," Mitchell whispered before he rolled off Dean. Mitchell didn't leave, instead settling in at Dean's side.

"I missed you, too." Dean reached down and held onto Mitchell's hand, lacing their fingers together.

"Then don't leave again. Stay here with me," Mitchell pleaded.

Dean closed his eyes against the pain clawing at his chest. "I wish I could, but I can't do that to Chris."

A look of hurt flickered over Mitchell's strong features before he composed himself. "I guess I understand."

A few awkward moments of silence followed until Mitchell finally broke it, "So, you really didn't know about the second video?"

"No. If I did, I would have prepared you for it. I never would have let you be blindsided like that." God, he hoped Mitchell believed him. Dean could never have willingly hurt him that way.

"Did you know that Joel was being held captive?" Mitchell had closed off his expressions.

Dean couldn't tell if he was angry or not. "Yeah," Dean confessed before he hastened to add, "but I didn't know they were treating him

that way."

Mitchell nodded, but he still kept on that blank mask. "What did you mean when you told me to be careful of Chris?"

Dean got up and sat on the edge of the bed, his back to Mitchell. "You know I can't tell you any more than I already have."

"Can't or won't?" Mitchell demanded, a bite of anger in his voice.

"That's not fair and you know it." Dean ran his hands through his hair as he wished this moment away. Why did it always have to come back to this? "You know I can't betray my pack's confidence. Not even to you."

"Damn it, this is my brother's safety we're talking about." Mitchell got up and started to get dressed.

The frustration in Dean reached a breaking point. He felt torn between the pack he'd been raised to always protect above all else and the feline he'd grown to care for more than anything. How could he still manage to help Mitchell and not betray Chris? Then the perfect answer hit him. It was so obvious that he could have kicked himself for not thinking of it sooner. "Russell!"

Mitchell paused, shirt half on as his brows furrowed in confusion. "Who's Russell and why are you shouting his name *after* we're had sex?"

"It's one of my cousins."

"Ew, that's more than a little disturbing."

Dean had to hold back his laughter. "Get your mind out of the gutter. We're not that type of pack."

Mitchell stared at him in a gaped-jawed shock. "You mean there are packs out there that are into that kind of thing?"

"One or two, but we don't associate with them." Dean waved his hands in an impatient gesture, eager to get back onto subject. "Russell was the exiled wolf who sent Chris the second video."

"Okay," Mitchell said slowly, obviously still not getting it.

"Don't you understand? While I can't tell you certain details because pack law forbids it, an exiled Wolf wouldn't be under the same restrictions."

A smile slowly spread over Mitchell's lips. "So, he could fill in some of the gaps for me."

"Exactly and I just happened to know where he lives. Good for us I'm not forbidden from giving you that information. We can leave first thing in the morning."

Mitchell came over and gave him a hard kiss. "You're the best."

"I wouldn't get too excited yet. Russell may not be too talkative unless you're willing to pay him. He's a greedy fucker."



"You let me worry about making him talk." Mitchell pulled back and finished getting dressed. "Why don't you get some rest? I'm just going to run down to Carson's office and see if he found anything out about Joel."

Dean nodded his agreement because he did feel tired. He and Chris hadn't gotten much sleep the night before and it had finally caught up to him. Stretching out on the mattress, Dean got comfortable. He'd just closed his eyes when he felt a warm cloth cleaning his stomach. Cracking his lids, he saw Mitchell sitting on the edge of the bed, a look of utmost affection softening his features. "I thought you were leaving," Dean said, his voice already heavy with sleep.

"I am. I just wanted to make sure you were taken care of first," he replied softly.

Wow, that had to be a first. Usually it was Dean who took care of others. If it wasn't attending to Chris' demands, then it was someone else in the pack that needed his attention. As Chris' second, Dean could never refuse them either. A strange sensation went through Dean as he realized that if he weren't careful, he could fall in love with Mitchell.

Mitchell bent down and placed a tender kiss to Dean's cheek. "Get some sleep. I'll see you in the morning."

\* \* \* \*

After Mitchell had managed to pull himself away from Dean, he slipped out of the room, taking care not to be spotted. Feeling like a thief in his own home, he stole down the hall and then left via the front door.

Given the late hour, the building was now nearly deserted. Mitchell still went straight to Carson's office, knowing he'd be hard at work. One thing he knew about the Cheetah is, while he may be a pain-in-the-ass smart mouth, he wouldn't rest until he had the answers Mitchell needed.

As he entered the room, he wasn't too surprised to see Keegan still there as well, even though he was asleep on the couch that took up one half of the room instead of working at the computer. Mitchell paused long enough to toss a blanket over him before he took the chair next to Carson. "What did you find out?" he asked.

Carson leaned over and made a loud sniffing sound. "Boy, it's a good thing we can't leave a scent on Wolves and vice versa."

"Don't start," Mitchell warned.

Carson went on as if he hadn't heard. "Because if we did, I'm guessing you'd be reeking of Dean."

"I mean it, just drop it."

"How long do you think you'll be able to hide

this from the others? Frankly, I'm shocked you've managed to keep your secret this long, what with the nightly sex chats."

Mitchell finally had enough. Leaning in close, he pinned Carson with a hard stare. "Whatever you found must be pretty bad if you're being this big of an asshole to distract me."

Carson immediately backed down, his gaze dropping in a guilty gesture. "Maybe I'm just tired and getting grumpy."

Mitchell snorted. "Please, you were born grumpy and have been that way ever since. Now why don't you just rip the *Band-Aid* off the wound and tell me the bad news already?"

Carson shot a worried look over at Keegan before he finally sighed. "Are you sure you really want to know? I don't even know if it will help you track him."

"Yes, I need every bit of information I can get on him."

Carson cursed under his breath before he nodded, then started typing on his keyboard. "As you already know, after he turned fourteen and ran away from his last foster home, we haven't been able to find out squat about the last nine years of his life. So I thought maybe I would have more luck if I approached this at a different angle."

"I don't follow."

"Something the Raven said in the video got me to thinking. Remember how he remarked that it wouldn't be the first time Joel..." Carson trailed off as he swallowed hard, obviously unable or unwilling to finish the rest of the disgusting sentence.

"Yeah, I recall that," Mitchell said, rage burning in his gut at the thought about what that Raven had done.

"Well, that made me wonder if maybe Joel had an arrest record. So, I went through the court records and this time I looked for anything under the name Noah." Carson punched a few more keys and an image of Joel popped up on the screen.

It was a mug shot and Joel looked so damn young and scared in the picture. His eyes wide, his dark hair messed up and dirty.

"What was he arrested for?" Mitchell already dreaded the answer.

"Solicitation, petty theft, loitering, shoplifting," Carson replied, his gaze softening. "It wasn't once or twice. They would arrest him, throw him back in the system and then he'd run away again."

Mitchell barely heard him, his mind too fixated on the *solicitation* part. "What was he running from?"

Carson looked even more uncomfortable. "I did some more digging on his last foster mother.

While she's never been in trouble and looks perfectly clean, she did have a boyfriend at the time Joel lived with her."

Mitchell lowered his head as an icy brick of dread slammed into his gut. *I don't want to hear this.* "Who was he?"

Carson tapped on the keyboard and another mug shot popped up, this one appeared to be prison issue.

Mitchell barely spared the fat, piece of shit human a glance.

Carson startled to rattle of information, "His name is Gary Smyth and he's doing time for assault and child molestation."

"What prison is he in?" Mitchell demanded, his voice raising.

Keegan stirred, but didn't wake.

Carson hesitated for a moment as he fiddled with an ink pen, his gaze drifting to Keegan. Finally, he said, "The Ionia Maximum Correctional Facility. It's around an hour's drive from here."

"I know where it is," Mitchell snapped. "Has Vapor got back from his last mission, yet?"

"Are you sure you want things to go down this way?" Carson continued to toy with the ink pen, twisting it hard.

Mitchell half-expected it to snap. "Is Vapor back or not?" Mitchell carefully enunciated each

word for effect. Vapor was a Cougar who had earned his nickname for his ability to just disappear into his surroundings. Dangerous and scary looking, most felines gave him a very wide berth. While he never shared his past, it had obviously included some special ops work because he'd already been highly trained when he joined the coalition. He was also the perfect man for what Mitchell had in mind.

"Yeah, he just rolled in around a couple hours ago. When he heard you'd turned in for the night though, he took off."

"Shoot him an email and tell him I need to see him first thing in the morning about a new assignment." When Carson still hedged, Mitchell cocked a brow. "Problem?"

"Look, as much as I hate nothing more than to be the voice of reason, do you think this is such a good idea?"

Mitchell slammed the palm of his hand on the desk, the blow knocking over an empty coffee cup. "We both know what that human did to Joel."

"I feel you, but you need to remember the deal you signed with the military."

"How can I forget when the thing is a damn thorn in my ass. I do what they say, they make sure we have enough money to keep operating," Mitchell replied, deliberately being glib.

"Damn it, Mitchell, you know what I'm talking

about. How about the part where we're forbidden from killing any human unless we have the okay from the higher ups?"

Mitchell jerked his head in the direction of the mug shot. "That *thing* isn't human. He's a sick, disgusting scourge that I plan on scraping from the bottom of society's shoe."

Now it was Carson who cocked a brow, although his had a big silver stud in it. "Now that's an analogy I've never heard before. You mind if I have it printed on a t-shirt?"

"By all means, when have I ever stopped you from having fun at my expense?"

"There is one other thing you should know," Carson added, his expression darkening. "There's a yearlong gap between the two videos."

Mitchell's blood turned to ice as the ramifications of that statement hit him. "Are you trying to say they've had Joel for a year now?"

"I'm not for sure yet, but I think we need to start entertaining that possibility."

Mitchell took several deep breaths as he fought the battling emotions of anger, guilt and despair. Could things possibly get worse? They were silent for a few more moments, before Mitchell asked, "Does Keegan know about Joel's past?"

"No, he fell asleep before I found out about all this." Carson glanced up, his expression hard and unwavering. "I won't keep it from him though."

There's no secrets between us."

Mitchell nodded. He honestly hadn't expected anything less. "It's going to hit him hard. Even though he and Joel haven't seen each other since they were babies, Keegan is still going to feel a deep attachment because they're littermates."

"I know." Carson ran his hands through his black hair, brushing it out of his face. "You should know, Keegan has already told me he's going to demand to go on the rescue mission."

Mitchell balked at that statement. "No way. He's not close to being field-ready."

"I don't think we'll be able to stop him." Carson sighed, suddenly looking older. "Christ, Mitchell, the video really did a number on, Cub. I've don't think I've ever seen him that upset. I promise I'll keep Keegan close by my side and protect him."

"Yeah, just make sure he doesn't handle a gun or you will have to protect *us* from him."

"Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?" Carson leaned back in his chair, his gaze pensive.

"When have you ever held back from asking anything?" Mitchell snorted.

"How did you and Dean first hook up?"

Mitchell shot another look over to make sure Keegan still slept. Turning back around, he hedged. After keeping everything secret for so long, it seemed odd to be talking so openly about



it. Yet at the same time, he knew it may make him feel a little better to finally confide in somebody. "It was on one of the few joint missions the coalition did with Chris' pack. Dean and I were tracking down a Raven. The bird was a wily, fuck who kept managing to be one-step ahead of us. We'd chased him clear across the country before we finally did manage to corner and eliminate him."

"And in the meantime, you and Dean had plenty of time to get close," Carson surmised.

"Yeah, I fell for him hard and I thought the feeling was mutual. Come to find out I was just fooling myself," Mitchell said, not surprised at how bitter he sounded.

"I don't believe you're right about that. I've seen the way he looks at you when he thinks nobody is watching. He has it bad for you."

"That's where you're wrong."

"How can you be so certain of that?" Carson pressed.

"Because when that mission was completed and it was time for us to go home, I begged Dean to come with me. I fucking laid all my feelings out in the open and he still chose his pack over me. So while we may be great together in bed, for Dean, that's all it is. Just sex and nothing more." Damn if it didn't nearly kill Mitchell to admit that aloud, too.

## CHAPTER SIX

Noah stood under the spray of tepid water and rinsed away the remnants of the previous day's nightmare. It didn't work though. No matter how hard he scrubbed, he still felt the same—used, dirty and helpless.

He blinked against the harsh lighting as a wave of nausea slammed into his gut. An all too familiar side effect of the opiates. Ever since he'd first been brought to this hell hole, they'd kept him pumped full of drugs. It was always just enough not to make him totally out of it, but yet the right amount to make things fuzzy around the edges. A bout of dizziness hit, making him sway for a moment. He braced one hand against the cheap tile wall to steady himself. The bright silver cuff on his wrist stood out against the dingy white of the stall.

He stared at the thick band of metal as a shiver ran down his spine. When he'd first been

captured, they'd told him the thing would deliver an electric shock if he tried to escape. Of course, being the rebel he was, he'd still made a break for the front doors the earliest chance he got.

Not only had he got a volt that knocked him on his ass and sent him into convulsions, but he managed to tick off their handlers. A guilty feeling settled in his gut as he recalled the punishment for that. He'd been forced to watch as they beat the shit out of Ranger. Then when they were done with him, they'd turned their fists on Noah. He still carried a small crescent-shaped scar under his eye as a memento of that incident.

The scar he could live with. It was having to watch Ranger get hurt that'd cut deep. Ranger meant the world to Noah. It had been Ranger who'd scraped Noah off the streets and gave him a place to live, Ranger who'd been the only true friend Noah had ever known. His only family. Most of all, Ranger had been the one who'd first told Noah what he was—a feline shifter.

Not that it really mattered that he wasn't really human. Be he person, cat shifter or Big Foot's long lost cousin, at the end of the day, things really hadn't changed. Noah was and would forever be some punk street hustler who had no future.

The water had cooled, but he continued to stay under the spray, not willing to leave the bathroom. Not that the postage stamp-size area

held any real interest, he just didn't relish the idea of going back into the room that served as his cell.

After several moments, he began to shiver and knew he couldn't linger any longer. Not unless he wanted to go into hypothermia. Which wouldn't be a bad way to go when he thought about it. In fact, the thought of just being able to go to sleep forever and leaving behind all the pain held real appeal. He couldn't even do that though. Not only wasn't he a quitter, but he had Ranger to think about.

He'd been warned that if he did something stupid, like trying to harm himself, Ranger would be hurt in turn. Since day one, they had made it clear that Noah was to stay alive and kicking. For some crazy reason, they were convinced that he was related to some important feline shifter and because of that, he'd be worth a lot on the auction block. That still didn't mean he was entirely protected though. Ever since his first night in the living nightmare, he'd been the subject to all kinds of *special treatment*. Most of it had come from the leader, a guy who'd forced Noah to call him Master.

Noah snorted. *Master?* Seriously? The guy must have some major complex. Nevertheless, as he made fun of the man, Noah still felt the cold slide of fear as he thought about some of the things Master had forced on him. Of the things he made

Noah do.

Noah turned off the water and grabbed a thin towel to dry off. Goose bumps covered every inch of his skin and he continued to shiver from the cold. His teeth chattered, the sound loud in the quiet of his bathroom. God, he'd give anything for a *Snuggie* and a hot coffee. Even after he got dressed in his standard issue gray sweatpants and matching t-shirt, he still didn't warm up.

Just as he was doing up the drawstring tie on his pants, he smelled it—the sickly sweet, rotting garbage scent that always lingered on Master. Noah shivered harder, but this time it had nothing to do with the cold. He didn't just fear Master, every beat of Noah's heart, breath of his lungs was dedicated to the terror he felt for the evil man.

While Noah knew that Master wasn't human, he still didn't know exactly what the man was. He didn't smell like a feline shifter, nor did he have the same outdoor scent that Ranger and the other Wolves had.

All Noah did know was that the instant he'd met Master, he'd known the man was his enemy. Even before Master touched him, Noah had been wary of the small, dark-haired man.

"Joel, stop hiding from me," Master called.

Noah bristled at the use of his birth name. When he first ran away from his foster home, he changed it. It had been his way of leaving his old

life and all his dirty secrets behind. Having it hurled in his direction again brought back too many horrible memories.

“Do you want me to come in there and get you?” Master demanded, his voice taking the hard bite of anger that Noah knew all too well.

“Coming, Master,” Noah replied because, no, he didn’t want Master to come in and get him. The one and only time he’d done that had not made for a fun time.

With a deep breath to steady his nerves, Noah opened the door and padded out. The small room that had served as his home for the past year seemed as stark as ever, the concrete floors and walls giving it a whole bunker look. The best he could figure out was that the building was underground. Otherwise, he had no clue to as where they had him.

Master sat on the edge of the bed. As always, he was dressed from head to boot in all black leather. It matched his equally dark hair and eyes. The whole wannabe vampire thing made his skin look paler and more sallow looking. When he crooked a beckoning finger, Noah felt a little queasy as he stared at the long, curled fingernail. Something that looked suspiciously like blood had settled into the creases.

When Noah continued to linger by the door, Master’s eyes glinted with anger. “Where are you

supposed to be?"

"Sorry," Noah mumbled before he rushed over. Once he reached the bed, he dropped so his knees hit the cold floor, then bent over to lay his head in Master's lap. It was the position the man always demanded Noah take when they were alone in his room. Noah despised the feeling of the warm leather against his cheek, the sounds of Master's rasping breaths. Master reached out and pressed Noah's face more firmly into his lap. That cloying scent surrounding the man grew stronger, making Noah gag. He clamped his lips together to hide it as he closed his eyes and wished himself somewhere else. Anywhere would have been fine, just so it wasn't that room. He flinched and had to repress his fight-or-flight reaction when he felt long fingers thread through his wet hair.

"You let yourself get chilled. That displeases me."

Master had this annoying habit of talking like the stereotypical baddie from an action film, using complete sentences and big words. Sometimes Noah thought the only thing missing was a cheesy soundtrack and some henchmen. Noah couldn't hold back a gasp of pain when Master gave his hair a hard tug. Oops, he'd drifted and forgotten to respond to the man's comment. "Sorry."

"You seem to say that a lot."

"I know. I don't mean to keep failing you." Self-

loathing filled Noah as he spoke the groveling words.

"Yet, we both know that you will continue to fall short of my expectations." Master gave another tug, this time titling Noah's head back so their gazes locked.

Noah fought not look away as those evil eyes glared down at him. Fear clawed at his chest, making it hard to breath and he just barely held in the whimper bubbling in his throat. "I'll be good, I promise."

"No you won't. You'll continue to bumble around and make stupid mistakes. I should just end both our misery and put a bullet in your pea-sized brain." Despite the death threat, Master's touch had turned gentle. He even went so far as to lovingly stroke Noah's cheek.

"I know I let you down and I don't mean to, honest. It's just I feel groggy all the time and it makes it hard for me to think," Noah tried to rationalize, hoping to save his hide and maybe get a cutback on his sedatives at the same time.

"I do that to protect you. Not only from getting hurt when you try to escape, but from the pain of a first shift. I can sense your time is close and I don't want you to go through the trauma when you haven't been prepared for it."

Noah tried hard not to snort in disbelief. More likely Master didn't want to have to deal with a



giant kitty cat going into revenge mode. He'd been told his animal form was a Jaguar. While Noah didn't know much about that particular breed of cat, he did know any feline came with a nice set of claws and teeth. Right then Noah would have given his left nut to have something sharp like that to lash out. He'd love to be able to pay back even a little bit of the hurt he'd received.

Master sighed. "It's really disappointing how you don't know anything about our world."

Even though he knew the smart thing to do would be to grovel some more, Noah blurted, "If I'm such a letdown, then why do you keep me?"

Something shifted in Master's expression.

If he hadn't known better, Noah would have almost said it was concern and...love? It only lasted a flash of a moment before the cold, evilness returned, but Noah felt certain he hadn't imagined it.

"I've already told you. I'm using you to draw out Mitchell."

That had always confused Noah. "We don't even know each other, so why do you think he'll try to rescue me?"

"It won't matter to him. Mitchell has one weakness and that's his love for his family, of which you're a member of. I know, without a doubt, once he knows where you are, nothing will stop him from coming. He'll also wreak havoc on

everything that stands in his way, too."

Noah shook his head. "Why would you want that? It sounds suicidal."

"I have no plans on being here when the big, bad Jaguar shows up."

Maybe it was because he'd been raised human, but Noah still didn't get it. "So why lure him here in the first place?"

"Because Adam and his pack will still be here and they are the ones I want to be at the end of Mitchell's fury. If he attacks the strongest Wolf pack, then all the other Wolves will take offense and the felines will have a whole new enemy to worry about," Master explained slowly as if he was addressing a dimwit.

"What would you have to gain from that?" It scared Noah a little to be asking all these questions because he never knew when Master would get offended and shut him up. He pressed on though, because this was the most information he'd got since he'd been captured.

"Do you know what kind of shifter I am?" Master asked.

Noah's heart pounded. Finally, after all this time, he'd get the answer to one of the questions plaguing him. "No. I asked some of the guards, but they refused to tell me. They said it would be better for me to never know what you really are."

"That's not too surprising. My kind has never

gotten along well with other shifters. They probably don't like admitting who they're associating with." Master started to stroke Noah's cheek again.

Noah resisted the urge to shirk back from the touch. It was hard though. One of the reasons why he took so many showers was because he wanted to get the taint of Master's caresses off his skin. He needed to feel clean of the evil that seemed to ooze from the man's body. It never worked though, because no matter how long he stayed in that dingy shower, he could still smell Master's scent clinging to his skin. If he ever got out of this mess, the first thing Noah wanted to do was take a long, hot bath. Maybe a few hours of bubbles and a stiff scrub brush would finally get his body uncontaminated again. "Why would they care what I think?" Noah asked, getting back on topic. Maybe if he kept Master talking he wouldn't want to move onto other activities.

Master laughed bitterly. "Because even you, who are nothing more than a piece of product to sell to the top bidder, rank higher in their opinion than I do. Like I said, Wolves really don't like Ravens."

"Then why are they even working with you in the first place?" That question finally did earn Noah another hair tugging. He sucked in a breath as he held back the yelp of pain.

"Because, while Adam has great aspirations, he doesn't have the means or brains to attain them. That's where I come in. I help keep his operations stable and going in the right direction."

"I guess that makes sense. So if he's such an idiot, then why are *you* working with *him*?" Noah winced, waiting for another yank to his head, but none came.

"Like I said before, if your brother's fury is centered on Adam and his pack, then he won't be worrying about me. If the Wolves and the felines are fighting amongst each other, it will weaken their resources and strength. Then the Ravens will finally be able to take them out."

Noah stilled as cold dread filled him from the inside out. This guy had to be crazy. There could be no other explanation. "That plan will never work." Even as he said that, Noah wondered why Master was sharing so much information. Before he'd always come in, used Noah and then left. Never before had he lingered to chat and certainly not about something this deep.

"It will work perfectly and all because I got lucky enough to stumble across one of Mitchell's most precious assets. Just think about it? A year ago, you were nothing more than twenty-dollar street hustler who did his business in the back seats of cars. Now, you're about to be the whole reason two races go to war."

Just the mere thought of that possibility even being remotely true set his heart racing, despite the heavy dose of sedatives. “Why do you hate him so much?”

“I’m weary of having the shifter world look at him like he’s a god while at the same time they view me as the scum of society. Just once, I’d like to see him lose at something.”

Although he couldn’t recall ever meeting Mitchell, a part of Noah wanted to yell that his big brother could never be bested. Over the past year, Noah had developed a strange, one-sided devotion to his unseen sibling. With no other hope, he’d clung to the thought of having someone out there who may actually give a damn. As a result, Noah had nearly grown to worship Mitchell.

Which was stupid, since he knew that if he ever had a face-to-face with the guy, Mitchell would never want anything to do with him. Master had been right about one thing—at the end of the day, Noah was nothing more than a twenty-dollar street hustler.

The Raven got up and pulled back the covers of the narrow bed. Noah started to shiver again as he cast a wary glance at the thin mattress that he’d grown to hate.

“I can smell your fear.” Master ran a soft caress over Noah’s shoulder. “Don’t worry. I just want

you to get under the blankets and warm up. I'm leaving and won't be joining you."

Noah hesitated only a moment before he scrambled onto the bed and settled onto his side, his face toward the wall. Normally he slept with an eye on the door, but he hoped the lack of further interaction would make Master leave quickly. When the Raven pressed a kiss to his temple, Noah jerked in shock.

"I think I'm going to keep you," Master whispered as he skimmed the back of his knuckles along Noah's jaw. "You're too beautiful to let go."

Noah tensed at the words. He'd rather be dead than spend the rest of his life with Master. Since he didn't dare say those words aloud, he instead, closed his eyes and feigned going to sleep. After one more kiss, Master left the room, the heavy sliding of the lock making Noah finally break. Latching onto the one comfort he had, he started to plead with his hero.

"Mitchell, come get me. I don't want to be here anymore," Noah whispered as tears started to fall, soaking the pillow. "I need you, Mitchell. I'm so scared."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“Are you sure Russell will be able to help us?” Mitchell asked as they got out of the car and stood in front of a large house.

“Positive. Russell has a toe in nearly every illegal activity in Michigan,” Dean replied as he gazed up at the opulent dwelling. He slowly shook his head in wonder as he realized that maybe crime did pay. The place was rich, lavish and too nice to even be called a house. Maybe manor would be a better term. It even had a circular drive, fountain and twin wolf statues flanking the door.

“Oh, look! They’re watching us!” Brent exclaimed as he pointed up to one of the many security cameras aimed in their direction. He gave a cheesy grin as he waved at one.

Without missing a beat, Carson turned to Mitchell. “Please, tell me I can moon them.”

“Maybe later, if the meeting doesn’t go well,”

Mitchell replied just as quickly.

They approached, Mitchell and Dean leading the way. Before they'd even planted a boot on the bottom step of the porch, the door opened to reveal one of Russell's top men.

"Where's your Alpha?" the Wolf challenged Dean. "I didn't think you could shake the piss off your dick without Chris' approval."

"Interesting visual," Brent said under his breath.

"Really, maybe if we ask, the Wolf brothers would be willing to demonstrate that one for us," Carson agreed.

Dean started to question Mitchell's wisdom in bringing both of them on the mission. Brent or Carson by themselves was bad enough, but when they got together, they tended to feed off one another. Usually, it was entertaining to watch, but now it could prove disastrous. Dean decided to cut to the chase before their smartass comments got the door slammed in his face. Glaring at the Wolf, Dean curled his hands into fists and twisted his lips in contempt. "Save the shit and take me to Russell."

The Wolf bristled, a low growl rumbling in his chest. If he had been in animal form, his hackles would have stood on end. "Why should I do that?"

Brent started to say something else, but a



gesture from Mitchell shut him up. Nodding his head at the Wolf, Mitchell soothed, "We mean your Alpha no harm. I have a business proposition that may interest him."

"What could a cat have that could interest us?" The Wolf screwed his face in disgust.

"I'm afraid that's something that I can only discuss with Russell." Mitchell gave an apologetic smile. "I'm sure you understand."

The Wolf finally nodded and let them in. They weren't frisked because, quite frankly, what was the use when their animal forms were their most deadly weapons? They did have several Wolves surrounding them. All of whom looked ready to attack at the slightest provocation.

A protective streak went through Dean as he realized how much danger Mitchell could be in if the Wolves decided to show aggression. Not that he doubted the Jaguar's ability to defend himself. It's just Dean would rather the threat not be there at all. The mere thought of Mitchell being harmed made a sharp spike of panic go through Dean and he had to stop himself from reaching out and grabbing onto the man's hand. Hopefully, they could get this over with quickly so Russell, his henchmen and those stupid wolf statues could be just a distant memory.

They were led to a large study and the heavy door shut with a resounding thud. Once they were

alone, Keegan went over and tried to knob. "They didn't lock us in. That's a good sign, right?"

His voice sounded so earnest and hopeful, Dean hated to disappoint him. "Not really. It shows they see us as prey and not much of a threat."

Keegan paled. "Oh...ouch, that's a blow to the pride."

"It just means they underestimated us," Brent snapped as he started to pace the room.

Dean expected him to wear a hole in the high-end imported rug. He reminded Dean a bit of a how a fully animal Jaguar would act in a cage.

"I'll say this, he has an impressive library," Carson added as he studied the heavy bookshelves lining one wall.

"Great, if things get dicey, you can always impress him by quoting Chaucer," Mitchell deadpanned.

"Oh cool! I have *The Canterbury Tales* memorized," Keegan supplied, looking hopeful again.

Dean paused as he looked at Keegan in shock. "All of them?"

"Sure, that and all the works of Shakespeare, too. I got bored one summer." Keegan shrugged.

"You scare me sometimes," Brent cut in, a look of awe on his face.

"Would it make you feel better if I told you I

also have all of Arnold Schwarzenegger's movie roles memorized in chronological order?" Keegan teased as he went over to study the books.

Dean hid a smile. He'd never known that brothers could have such a lighthearted relationship. With Chris, he felt as if he always had to watch his step, for fear of insulting the older Wolf. It was refreshing to see that some families could just be themselves around one another.

"A little better," Brent conceded. "You know, you're not the only smarty pants in the family. I've read all the *Harry Potter* books, twice."

Keegan's rich laughter filled the room, making everyone else smile in turn. The Jaguar seemed to have that affect on others though. It made Dean wonder, not for the first time, how such an innocent, sweet kid had ended up with someone as jaded as Carson. Although, he did have to admit, he'd never seen the Cheetah shifter smile so much. Maybe Keegan had managed to smooth out Carson's rough edges a bit.

They all sobered when the door opened and Russell came in. Even though he wasn't big by shifter standards, only topping six-foot, Russell still had an aura around him that screamed dominance. He was dressed to match his house, in expensive looking tailored pants and a red silk top. He wore his dark brown hair short. Dean

knew he did it to hide the mass of curls that Russell had always despised for being too *girly*. Not that there was anything feminine about the Wolf. He had a kind of rugged quality to him that was too masculine to be pretty, but still managed to attract attention of both sexes.

“Alpha,” Dean acknowledged, going on one knee in front of Russell. While technically Russell was nothing more than a stray with a bunch of lackeys at his call, Dean wanted to start things off right. He even went so far as to bend his head forward, exposing the back of his neck in a show of submission.

“Now this is interesting.” Russell laughed. “What would Chris say if he saw you right now?”

Chris would probably kick Dean’s ass, then drag him out of the house. Dean didn’t say that aloud however. “I don’t come at his behest.”

“No, you’re here because you have a soft spot for kitties,” Russell said in a way too knowing voice.

Dean tensed, wondering just how much the Wolf knew about his relationship with Mitchell. “We have allied with the felines several times over the years.”

“*Allied?*” Russell echoed. “Is that what they’re calling it nowadays?”

Behind him, Dean could hear a low snarl coming from Mitchell’s direction. Dean for his

part, refused Russell's bait. Instead, he kept his head down and waited for Russell to accept him. After a few tense filled moments, Russell finally touched the back of Dean's neck. The move finally allowed Dean to stand. "We have a favor to ask you," Dean started.

"Hmmm...I would have thought it'd be enough that I gave Chris the video of Mitchell's baby brother." Russell went behind his desk and took a seat, kicking his feet onto the top. His gaze traveled over the group before it stopped and rested on Keegan. A look of unmistakable lust went over Russell's eyes as he eyed the young Jaguar up like a yummy bone to be gnawed on. "Well, look at that. We have a newcomer."

The tension in the room went up several levels as Carson stepped closer to Keegan. Mitchell tensed, his hands briefly curling into fists, while Brent just glowered.

Keegan swallowed hard before he tilted his chin up defiantly. "Yeah, Carson just found me a few months ago."

"Did he now?" Russell beamed, really turning on the charm. "Too bad I didn't find you first."

Carson let out a loud growl as he stepped in front of Keegan in a protective gesture.

Dean rushed forward to the edge of the desk, desperate to put the flame out on the dynamite keg. "It wasn't the felines' idea to come to you. I

was the one who suggested it." Dean sighed in relief when Russell's gaze swung his way.

"Why would you do that?"

Although the question seemed innocent enough, Dean could detect the underlying annoyance in it. He knew Russell liked to fly under the radar. Hell, the Wolf's livelihood depended on not attracting attention. The last thing he probably wanted was to have the leader of the felines showing up at his house.

"Let's not be coy, anymore," Mitchell interrupted, smoothly. "You know damn well why I'm here. I want information on the bastards who are holding my brother."

"And you think I'm like Dean who loves to play with kitties? Your really don't know me too well. If you want my help, you're going to have to bring something interesting to the table." Russell smirked.

Mitchell nodded to Brent who then walked over to the desk and dumped a heavy sounding duffle bag inches from Russell's feet. The Wolf shot a suspicious glance at Mitchell before he pulled it closer and unzipped it.

Dean caught the unmistakable wiff of money. A lot of it, judging by the low whistle Russell gave.

"You will get the other half when Joel is safe and in my custody," Mitchell said casually like he always walked around with the net worth of a

small country.

Russell lifted his eager gaze from the money. "It won't be easy. You have to realize they'll be expecting you. We both know that video was a tool to draw you out."

Mitchell smiled coldly. "Lucky for them it worked. They have my undivided attention."

Russell still hesitated a moment, his fingers nervously tapping the bag. "I may know something."

"Please, share with the rest of us," Brent urged, with just a hint of sarcasm. It seemed pretty obvious he wouldn't be founding a fan club in Russell's honor any time soon.

"Why don't you start with when the auction is supposed to be taking place?" Mitchell added.

"Two days from now. I just received the email telling me the location and time."

"And is it going to be in Pontiac like we thought?" Dean asked.

"Yes, but it's not going to be in the church. Instead, they're having it inside an old department store."

That bit of info didn't help much since Pontiac was riddled with closed down businesses. Dean worked hard to hide his disappointment. "Do you know which one?"

"Would I ever disappoint you, cousin?" Russell grinned....well, wolfishly.

"Actually, yeah you would," Dean admitted bluntly. The comment earned him a bark of laughter from Carson.

Russell smiled, showing he possessed a sense of humor, too. "It's that appliance store that used to run all those cheesy commercials."

Dean frowned as several links finally fell into place. "You mean the one that used to be across from the Summit Place Mall?"

"That's the one. Even though the auction won't be for a couple more days, yet, tomorrow they're having a preview for some of the higher end clients. The event is by invite only and they promise to have some of the better specimens on hand for inspection."

Mitchell curled his lip up in a show of aggression. "That's my brother your fucking talking about, not some cow for sale at the 4-H. So I suggest you don't use the word specimen when referring to him."

Russell held his hands up as his eyes grew wide with false innocence. "Of course I agree with you. Those were the words of the dealer, not me. I would never disrespect your kin that way." Even as Russell spoke those words, his gaze flicked over at Keegan. There was no mistaking the lust in the Wolf's expression.

Dean winced as he thought *Way to be subtle there, Russell. Might as well stand up and announce*



*you have it bad for Keegan. Not the best way to make friends.*

Almost as if hearing Dean's inner monologue, Carson let out another growl as he stepped closer to Keegan.

Russell picked up the bag and tossed it back to Mitchell. "I don't want your money."

Mitchell cocked his head to the side. "Then what do you want?"

Carson snarled as he pushed Keegan behind his back.

Russell laughed, almost as if the whole thing amused the hell out of him. "Don't worry, Cheetah. I'm not going to demand your mate's sweet ass as payment either. I have another favor to ask."

Now even Dean felt confused as he wondered what game Russell could possibly be playing. "What do you want then?" he croaked, his throat suddenly dry.

"I want Mitchell to promise to take Ranger into the coalition. We both know he can't go back to the pack and my house isn't a good environment for him."

Dean stood there, all deer-in-the-headlight look for several moments as he tried to absorb that request. He couldn't have been more surprised had Carson declared himself a Republican and invited them all to a Tea Party protest.

"I don't mind taking him in, but why can't he go back to the pack?" Mitchell asked.

Russell's gaze bore into Dean. "Do you want to tell him or shall I?"

Dean let out a half-cough as he tried to work some moisture in his mouth. "Chris had nothing to do with that."

Russell sneered, "Did I say he did?"

"No, but I can tell what you're insinuating and I don't appreciate it. When he found out what happened, he was just as angry as you are."

"Why do you continue to defend him? I would think you would be the first one to agree with me on this particular topic." Russell looked almost disappointed.

Dean's mind scrambled as he wondered what he'd done in the past that could have clued his cousin in one secret he'd always worked so hard to hide. Well, the one secret, aside from his relationship with Mitchell.

"Does someone want to clue us in to what you two are talking about?" Mitchell cut in.

When Dean lowered his gaze, Russell answered for him.

"Ranger's mother kicked him out when she found out he was gay."

"Chris nearly ripped her apart when he found out about it, too," Dean interjected angrily. While Chris may have his faults, he'd never exile a Wolf

for being gay.

"But I'm sure he didn't go out of his way to track Ranger down either. Better for everyone that the fag left before he could shame the pack," Russell spat out, his eyes wide with fury.

"You know, Chris would never think that way," Dean yelled.

"Maybe not, but he hasn't done anything to change the older-than-fuck pack mentality that it's a defect to be gay. Instead, he just covers his eyes and pretends it doesn't go on."

Dean threw his hands up in exasperation. "That's not fair and you know it."

Russell jumped to his feet and approached Dean. "No...what's not fair is what happened to you."

Dean tried to yell a denial, but all the emotions clogged his throat and made it impossible to do more than whisper, "Don't go there, please." God, he should have known better than to think he could hide anything from Russell. The Wolf may be cagey, greedy and an all around jerk, but he was also smart and way too attentive.

Russell gestured to the felines in the room. "Do they even know about you and Mitchell?"

Several surprised gasps in the room answered that question.

Mitchell moved forward and put his body between Dean and Russell. "Leave him alone,"

Mitchell snarled.

Russell shook his head sadly. "I'm not doing this to hurt Dean. I want to help him. Ever since he left you, he'd slowly been dying inside. Why do you think I left the pack? I love Dean like a brother and couldn't stand to watch him suffer anymore."

"And you think exposing all his secrets will somehow make him feel better?" Mitchell challenged.

Dean wanted to argue that they could stop discussing him as if he wasn't even there, but he still couldn't speak past the burning lump in his throat. So he just stood there like some idiot as a tense silence developed between Mitchell and Russell.

Finally, Russell broke. He lowered his head to Mitchell before retreating back behind his desk. "I'll meet you at the feline headquarters tomorrow and we can set up a rescue plan."

"We'll be waiting," Mitchell replied.

Unable to take any more, Dean spun on his heel and left the house. Jumping into the passenger seat of the nearest car, he buried his face in his hands as he tried to get his shit together. He didn't know what was worse, the fact that his secrets were finally out or the fact that he wasn't nearly as upset by the turn of events as he should have been.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

As soon as Dean walked into the large conference room the next morning, he met a confrontation. At least this time he could take some comfort that it didn't center around him.

"I'm doing it and nothing you say or do is going to stop me," Keegan yelled, getting right in Carson's face.

"Like hell you will. I'll drag you back to our bedroom and handcuff you to the bed if I have to," Carson replied, his dark gaze growing stormy. Most other shifters would have taken a step back, but Keegan took one forward.

Dean couldn't help but be impressed by the kid's spunk. "Whoa, what's going on?" Dean asked as he took a seat next to Brent.

"You mean besides the years of therapy Carson just caused me with the whole handcuffs remark?" Brent cocked a brow.

"Yeah," Dean replied, happy he and Brent were

still on speaking terms after all the previous night's events.

"Well, your good buddy, Russell offered to go in under the guise of attending the pre-auction so he could gather intel for our attack."

Dean shrugged. "That makes sense. We don't want to do an attack without knowing the layout of the building first. Plus, it would be easier and safer for the captives if we knew where they were before we started shooting the place up."

"The problem is we can't put a hidden camera or anything on Russell because the Wolves would smell it on him," Brent pointed out, his expression growing grim.

Dean hissed under his breath as he finally realized what exactly Keegan and Carson had been arguing about. While they couldn't send in a camera, they did have the next best thing...someone with a photographic memory. "What's Mitchell say about all this?"

Mitchell was across the room, deep in conversation with Russell. He didn't even seem to notice that Keegan and Carson were yelling at each other.

"Actually, believe or not, I think Mitchell may go for it. Keegan will be posing as Russell's slave, so he will be protected and we're going to be just down the road the entire time," Brent replied.

Dean continued to study Mitchell. They hadn't

spoken at all since the confrontation with Russell. Worry nagged Dean as he wondered if maybe Mitchell would want to end things with Dean now that everything was finally out in the open. Almost as if sensing his anxiety, Mitchell glanced over at Dean. As the Jaguar's gaze softened, Dean couldn't hold back the giddy smile that spread over his lips.

"Oh, gawd." Brent groaned dramatically. "Russell was right about you two, wasn't he?"

Dean never took his gaze off Mitchell. "Yeah, he was."

"Now we know why Mitchell kept insisting on *interrogating* you in private." Brent shook his head, as if he was just stunned by the juvenile behavior.

Dean wasn't fooled for a second. He let out a wicked laugh. "What can I say? I happen to like Mitchell's interrogation tactics."

"Aaaannnd...now I need even more therapy," Brent drawled.

"How long have those two been at it?" Dean gestured over to Keegan and Carson.

"About fifteen minutes. It doesn't matter how much Carson yells. Keegan will end up getting his way."

"How can you be so certain of that?"

Brent gave a lopsided grin. "Because Keegan always wins. Carson is a real softie where he's concerned."

Sure enough, a few minutes later, Keegan had Carson reluctantly agreeing to the plan. Although the Cheetah didn't look entirely happy with the situation, he did finally calm down enough to take a seat so the meeting could start.

Once Mitchell had everyone's attention, he first addressed Keegan. "Are you sure about this?"

"Absolutely," Keegan replied without hesitation.

Mitchell shifted his glance to Carson. "Russell has promised me that he'll keep Keegan in his sights at all times and protect him with his life."

"Why should we trust him," Carson snapped as he shot daggers at the Wolf.

"Because I want to get Ranger back just as much as you want to protect Keegan," Russell replied.

Mitchell nodded. "Okay then. Let's do this. The sooner we can get in there and get a layout of the building, the sooner we can get our kin back and bring them home."

\* \* \* \*

Even though he'd finally gotten out of his room for the first time in a year, Noah didn't feel like celebrating. In fact, he'd never felt lower.

An hour ago, one of the Wolves had come in and slid a thick, leather collar around Noah's neck.



Then they connected him to a leash and made him crawl on his hands and knees to another building.

They'd taken an underground tunnel that had been wet, cold and covered in some of the worst grim he'd ever smelled. Since he'd spent years as a street rat, that said a lot, too.

They hadn't even made it halfway down the tunnel before Noah's hands and knees became scraped, the rough ground cutting into his flesh. As he felt the warm stickiness from blood coating his sweat pants, he dimly wondered if shifters could get staph or tetanus. It would be just his luck to get struck by some mad infection. As it stood, he already had enough problems with constant pain from old and new injuries. Plus, he'd developed a deep, hacking cough over the past few days.

While he was dying to ask where they were taking him, he kept his questions to himself. His jaw and ribs were still sore from a beating he'd taken the previous night when he got in trouble for upsetting one of the guards. Hey, who knew the bastard would take offense to having a plastic food tray thrown at him? Okay, maybe Noah had, but it had been almost worth it to see the surprised look on the jerk's face when he got doused in sour milk and cold pea soup.

His hand slid in something slimy and he tipped forward, his face skidding on the gross floor. He

muttered a curse as the smell hit him even worse. He never would have thought it possible, but he found himself wishing for his tiny room and shower. He cried out when the Wolf gave the leash a hard jerk.

“Get moving. They’re waiting for you and the last thing you want is to piss them off.”

“Sorry,” Noah said as he started crawling again. He wondered if Master was one of the ones waiting for him. Ever since the other night, the Raven hadn’t come to Noah’s room—a reprieve that made Noah ecstatic.

As he finished the rest of his journey, Noah entertained himself by thinking of the various reasons why Master had been AWOL. All of them were more bloody and tragic than the last.

Maybe he’d got in a horrible car accident and had been burned to a crisp. Or perhaps one of the Wolves had gotten mad and eaten the bastard. Better yet, maybe Mitchell had finally caught up with the creeper.

They finally reached the end of the tunnel and the Wolf led Noah into a large room. A quick glance told him they were in a closed-down department store of sorts. While there were no products on the dusty shelves, there were still old signs, broken shopping carts and even a dusty cash register.

Several other captives were there, all of them

collared and leashed like Noah. He searched their faces, desperate to find one of his friends. Stark disappointment hit him when he didn't spot Ranger or any of the others. Before he knew it, he'd stupidly blurted, "Where's the Wolf that was brought in with me?"

The fist to his face came hard and quick, the blow knocking him to his side. He sucked in a breath as he felt blood trickling from his freshly cut lip. Before he could curl into a protective ball, he took another hit to his gut, this time from a foot. He tried to yell, but all that came out was a high-pitched gasp.

"Oh, I don't think Adam would appreciate you messing up his merchandise that way," a booming voice called.

The assault immediately stopped as the guard stepped back. "Just keeping him in line, Russell. You know how these felines need a strong hand."

"There's a fine line between a strong hand and damaging the goods and you've just stepped over it," the voice returned smoothly.

Noah used the distraction to scramble back to his knees. Keeping his head lowered, he looked up from under his lashes at his rescuer. A tall man stood a few feet away. Everything he wore, from his leather loafers to his tailored jacket, screamed money. He held a leash in his hand and on the end was another male.

Unlike Noah, this slave wasn't on his knees and he appeared to be treated a lot better, too. From his kneeling position, Noah judged him to be just a little bit taller, but they both had the same thin build.

Russell turned to his slave. "Poppet, why don't you go kneel next to the other kitty while Daddy talks to the nice men?"

A flicker of what might have been annoyance glimmered over the slave's face, but he obeyed. As soon as he settled onto the floor next to him, Noah continued to make comparisons—he himself was filthy, while this man was clean. Noah knew he probably reeked while this guy had a dense, almost tropical scent all over him.

Ashamed, Noah looked over to the side and almost missed it—the softest of touches to his hand. Stunned, he jerked his head back over and looked down. The new slave was using his pinky finger to give Noah a comforting caress. Almost completely undone by the first gentle touch in nearly a year, he lifted his gaze to search the man's face.

A slight sense of déjà vu struck Noah, as if he knew this guy from somewhere, but no matter how hard he racked his mind, Noah couldn't figure out who he was. The slave's eyes were wet with unshed tears and as stupid as it seemed, Noah could have sworn they were for him.

*It'll be okay*, the slave mouthed.

For the first time, Noah actually believed it. Then something Russell had said came back to Noah and he almost wept in relief. He'd said the slave was a feline. Could he possibly be connected to Mitchell?

Noah's hope must have shown on his face, because the other man gave a slight nod. Relief washed over his battered body as Noah bit back the sob of relief.

The feline's lips curled into a soft smile before he mouthed, *Soon. Be ready.*

Before they could communicate any further, Russell and the guard came back over. "Are you sure you won't let me purchase this specimen today?" Russell asked as he pointed at Noah.

The guard shook his head. "I was on strict orders not to let this one go until tomorrow."

"It's a shame," Russell tsked. "He would be such a wonderful addition to my collection."

The Wolf bowed his head respectfully. "Sorry, but I can't. I do have a young Hawk in the other room. You can buy him today if you like."

Russell sighed heavily, but he finally nodded. "Fine, take me to him. Come on, buttercup," he said as he tugged the leash.

As he watched the other feline being led away, Noah had to stop himself from lunging forward and begging to be taken, too. The mere thought of

separation from his only source of hope nearly had him in tears. The only thing that helped him keep it together was the words the feline had mouthed to him, *Soon. Be ready.*

Noah said the words repeatedly in his head as he silently prayed Mitchell would be in time to save him.

\* \* \* \*

After they had gotten back to headquarters, Mitchell immediately called all his top soldiers in for a meeting. There, they laid out the battle plan for the following day. Thanks to Keegan's memory, they were able to get a detailed layout of all the exits, windows and even the number of guards posted at each.

While Mitchell had been leery about letting Keegan go in, now he was glad they'd gone along with Russell's plan. It had been hard on Keegan. Not the whole part where he had to play the role of slave, led around like a poodle on a leash. It had been seeing his littermate and not being able to free him immediately.

After the meeting convened, the family continued to sit around the large table. Keegan had his head down, his arms acting as a makeshift pillow as he continued to mope. "You should have seen him. They'd beaten him so badly, I don't

know how he managed to even move let alone crawl around like they were making him do. Plus, he was so thin and dirty."

"It'll be okay," Mitchell soothed. "After tomorrow, we can get him back here and he'll be taken care of."

"I know, but I just can't stop from thinking about what they might be doing to him in the meantime. Carson told me about all the crap he's already been through and I just wish I could make things right for him now. It was so hard having to leave him behind today. I felt like I'd abandoned him or something."

"You didn't," Mitchell assured him. "You came back so you could give us the intel we needed to go in and extract him."

"I guess," Keegan agreed, sounding far from convinced. "At least we were able to get the Hawk out. Where is he, by the way?"

"He's in the infirmary. Doc Featherstone said he's going to be okay, but right now the kid is dehydrated and needed an IV."

"That's good to know." Keegan nodded.

Dean leaned forward to study the map of the auction site a little more. "So, the slaves were led there by an underground tunnel?"

"Yeah, I saw them coming through it while we were there. I don't know where it leads to." Keegan moved forward to study the map, too.

"That's okay, I think I may have an idea," Dean ventured.

"Where?" Mitchell asked.

"Any of you ever heard of the Pontiac State Hospital?" Dean asked as he settled back in his seat.

Brent frowned. "Sure, it was an insane asylum that closed down a while ago."

"I think that's where they're keeping the captives. It's right across the street from the auction site, so it would be close enough to transport the slaves, and the facility would be big enough for them to run their operation out of."

Keegan shook his head. "That wouldn't work. Most of the hospital has been demolished."

"Yes, but there have always been rumors of underground tunnels," Dean pointed out.

"I always thought that was an urban legend. You know kind of like how we used to think alligators lived in the sewers," Brent said.

"I did, too, but if you think about it, the theory would make sense."

"He may have a point," Mitchell added. "From the video, we could tell they were keeping Joel underground."

"So, does this change our attack plan?" Carson asked.

Mitchell nodded. "I think we should infiltrate the old store before they start the auction. If we



can get in before the Wolves open shop, then that may give us a bit of a jump on them so we would have time to get into the tunnels. That way, we can get to the captives before any of them are harmed."

"I think that's a perfect idea." Brent nodded his approval.

Keegan nervously cleared his throat. "I have one other question. Who's Adam?"

Dean was glad he'd been sitting because the sound of that name would have knocked him on his ass otherwise. Even though he'd been the one to set up things so Mitchell would find out about Adam in the first place, it still terrified him to know the moment he'd been dreading had finally arrived.

Mitchell tensed as his face grew stony. "Where did you hear that name?"

"Back at the auction site. Russell told one of the guards to stop beating Joel because Adam wouldn't like it if the merchandise was ruined."

"Fuck me," Brent spat. "So that's what Chris has been hiding from us."

Mitchell turned to look at Dean, the expression on his face so full of hurt, that it was painful to see. "Is that true?"

Feeling as if his heart was ripping from his chest, Dean slowly nodded.

Brent yelled another curse word as he pounded

on the table. Carson closed his eyes while he let out a low hiss and Mitchell just continued to study Dean.

Keegan made an impatient gesture with his hands. "Who is Adam and why is everyone so upset?"

Carson sighed heavily, "Adam is the leader of the strongest pack in Michigan."

"Oh." Keegan blinked. "Exactly how strong?"

"It's the only pack in the States that has more power than Chris' group," Brent supplied as he shot a murderous glare in Dean's direction.

"So, all this had nothing to do with Ranger or Joel, did it? Chris just saw it as an opportunity to use me to take down his rival?" Mitchell asked, his voice so cool it actually made Dean shiver a bit.

"Yes...no...I mean maybe for him, but not for me," Dean floundered, desperate to make things right. While he could have really given a damn about what the others thought, he didn't want Mitchell to feel betrayed. *How else is he supposed to feel when that's exactly what I did, though?*

Mitchell gave a bitter laugh before he ran his hands through his hair, his movements jerky and angry. "Why didn't you just tell me?"

"Because pack law —"

Mitchell slammed his hand on the table, cutting him off. "Enough about pack laws. I'm so sick of hearing about Chris and how you have to do

everything for him and the fucking pack.”

“I told Chris just to be honest with you up front. That you would go in no matter what because of your brother,” Dean rushed out, hoping to smooth things over.

For some reason that comment only seemed to anger Mitchell further. He let out a snarl as he swung his arm over the table, sweeping off papers, books and several drinks. “I wouldn’t have done it just for Joel. It would have been for you, too.”

“I’m sorry,” Dean cried as he sucked in a trembling breath. He’d never seen Mitchell this upset.

Mitchell continued as if he hadn’t heard Dean’s attempt at an apology. “I love you so fucking much that all you had to do was ask me for help. One word from you and I would have rolled over like some pussy lapdog and given you whatever you needed.”

“I tried to tell you in a roundabout way,” Dean countered.

“That wasn’t good enough!” Mitchell thundered. “What we have between us isn’t good enough anymore either. I’m sick of playing third behind Chris and your pack.”

Dean was remotely aware they still had an audience, but he didn’t even care anymore because Mitchell’s last comment had hit him like a

sledgehammer. "What are you trying to say?"

"That you pick to be with me...and I mean really be with me, or we need to go our separate ways. I can't keep up with the secrets, the long-distance phone calls and the loneliness. I'm done with it." With those parting words, Mitchell stormed from the room.

Dean watched him go, too paralyzed with despair and shock to give chase.

## CHAPTER NINE

**I**t took an hour of wheedling, but Dean finally got Brent to admit that Mitchell usually went to the roof whenever he grew upset. Wandering around the building, Dean a few wrong turns before he found the metal staircase that led to the top of headquarters.

Night had fallen, the bite of the crisp air hit Dean's skin, causing him to shiver. He pushed the discomfort aside and cast his gaze around. Since the building was large, he had to do a bit of looking before he found Mitchell. He was leaning against a stack of extra roofing material, his gaze sad as he stared off into the sky.

Dean took the opportunity to study him. Even sitting, Mitchell had a sleek sensuality to him that made Dean's heart beat just a bit harder. It was just more than the appearance that drew Dean in. Sure, that's what had first attracted him, but since then, he'd fallen in love with every single side of

Mitchell.

He loved the soldier, the brother, the friend, the leader. Most of all, Dean loved Mitchell for just being Mitchell. But did Dean love Mitchell more than his pack? That answer came to him without hesitation. Yes, he did. "I choose you," Dean called as he approached.

Mitchell jumped, confusion marring his brow. "Huh?"

"I don't want my pack. I don't want my family. Not if it means I have to give you up again." Dean sat down next to Mitchell and took his hand.

Mitchell's eyes widened in surprise, but he remained otherwise guarded. "Do you mean it?"

"Yes, I do. I love you, Mitchell, and if you'll still have me, I want to spend the rest of our lives together." Dean's voice cracked a bit at the end of that statement and for the first time in his life, he didn't care that he'd just shown a moment of weakness. His gut clenched in anticipation as he waited to see what Mitchell's response would be. After everything he'd put him through, Dean half-expected to get the boot. What he got instead was a tender smile as Mitchell squeezed his hand.

"Of course I still want you, you dumbass. I love you."

Dean let out a relieved laugh. "Aw, look at that, you've given me a pet name."

"Just come closer and give me a kiss."

"That's something Dumbass will always be happy to do," Dean murmured as he leaned forward.

One kiss led to another and soon they were making out as they pulled at each other's clothes. The air still had a bite to it, but Dean didn't care. Besides, he knew that they'd be warming each other up soon enough.

As soon as they were nude, Mitchell spread out his own t-shirt for Dean to kneel on. Dean bent over one of the boxes of roofing materials and tipped his ass up. He knew Mitchell approved by the way he hummed low as he ran a hand down the small of Dean's back.

"You're so fucking beautiful," Mitchell said and this time it was his voice that broke a bit.

"I can't believe we're really going to do this on the roof where anyone can see us." Dean jerked when he felt Mitchell part his ass. A second later, a warm velvet sensation bathed his hole as Mitchell rimmed him. "Oh, damn. That's good," Dean cried as he thrust back.

"I don't have lube in my pocket this time, so I'm having to get you slick in other ways," Mitchell replied before he started to eat Dean's ass.

Dean dug his fingers into the rough, wood of the box as he got lost in the sensations. Mitchell showed no mercy, penetrating Dean's hole, first

with his tongue and then his fingers. For once, they didn't have to worry about someone overhearing them, so Dean let his pleasure be known in loud moans and cries.

"That's it, babe, show me how much you love it," Mitchell crooned as he started to work three fingers in and out of Dean's channel.

"Fuck me. Claim me," Dean panted as he thrust back against Mitchell's hand.

Mitchell's fingers slipped from Dean's body. At first, Dean almost whimpered in protest until he felt the blunt head of Mitchell's cock pressing into his ass. He expected Mitchell to ease in slowly, as he always had in the past. Instead, Mitchell let out a loud snarl as he surged all the way in with one single thrust.

"Mine!" Mitchell growled as he started to pound into Dean.

Dean scrambled to get a better grip on the box so he wouldn't fall forward on his face. The bliss was so great, he never dreamed of asking Mitchell to slow down. If anything, Dean urged him on by letting out a howl of pleasure as Mitchell's cock brushed against his sweet spot.

"That's it, let everyone know who you belong to now," Mitchell urged as he reached around and started to stroke Dean's cock.

"Bite me," Dean begged. "Mark me."

With a low moan, Mitchell lowered his mouth



to Dean's shoulder. As soon as he felt the sharp sting of Mitchell's teeth breaking the skin, Dean came. Thick ropes of cum shot from his cock and coated the roof, as his body found release. After a few seconds, Mitchell joined him in bliss, his cock pulsating in Dean's ass.

"Mine," Mitchell proclaimed again, his voice no more than a whisper.

"Yours," Dean replied.

After they got dressed, Mitchell took him by the hand and they went back inside. As they walked through the building, Dean found he couldn't keep his hands off Mitchell, finding every excuse he could to brush against him. They just about reached the apartment when a voice cut into their private moment.

"Dean! There you are. I've been looking everywhere for you."

Chris came walking in their direction so fast, Dean half-wondered if his brother was fleeing from a pack of Hyena shifters. He was so distracted from his unseen foe, he didn't seem to notice Dean and Mitchell were holding hands until he was nearly on top of them.

"Is there something you guys want to tell me?" Chris asked, his brow furrowing in confusion as he looked from Dean to Mitchell, then to their linked hands.

Since there would be no easy way of breaking it, Dean just went for a blunt, “Yeah, I’m leaving the pack.”

Chris, who never showed emotion, actually went gape-jaw with shock. “What? Why?”

Dean smiled up at Mitchell. “Because I’ve finally decided to get my head out of my ass and be with my mate.” Chris’ face got that dark look on it that always let Dean know he was about to lose it. Before he could start yelling, another screamer interrupted him.

“Chris, you leg humping, bone chewing, kibble nibbler, don’t you ever walk away when I’m talking to you again.” Cassie marched up to Chris and started to punctuate her insults by thumping him in the chest with her finger.

Dean had seen Chris face many different foes – Ravens, Hyenas even a few Jackals. Not once had he shown the same terror he did when he looked down at Cassie. He even took a step in Mitchell’s direction, as if seeking protection.

“Are you going to tell my brother what you did, or do I have to do it for you?” Cassie demanded, one hand on her hip.

Chris shot a look that plainly screamed *help!*

“If this is about us going against Adam’s pack, you can save it. I already know,” Mitchell said, the corners of his mouth twitching.

“How?” Chris demanded as he glared at Dean.

"Save it with the looks," Mitchell snapped. "It wasn't Dean who told us."

"I introduced him to Russell," Dean butted in, not bothering to hide the snide bite to his tone.

There was a long, pregnant pause before Chris finally said, "You're a lot sneakier than I've ever credited you for. You knew Russell would make sure Mitchell found out."

Cassie snickered. "I've always known Dean was the smart brother."

"So does that make me the cute one?" Chris countered, a wicked glint coming to his eyes. It made Dean wonder just how close Chris and Cassie had been getting.

"No, he's cuter than you are, too." Giving him one last dirty look, she flounced off.

Chris watched her, his face full of shock, awe and a little bit of lust, too. "I can understand how you could fall for a cat, Dean. They have a certain appeal to them."

"She'd eat you alive," Mitchell warned.

"Yes, and I would enjoy every second of it," Chris breathed, a smile spreading out over his lips.

\* \* \* \*

Noah stared at the ceiling of his room and tried to calm his nerves. Ever since the encounter at the

auction house, he'd been so keyed up he couldn't even sleep. He knew that in the next few hours, his fate, be it good or bad, would finally be decided.

He would have loved to have paced to work off some of the excess energy. The last beating had made it nearly impossible to breathe, let alone walk. His breathing had taken on a wet, rattling sound, kind of like a wet vac. While he wasn't a doctor, he did know that probably wasn't a good thing.

A loud clatter of gunfire rang out from somewhere in the building.

Noah sat up with a jerk, hissing as the movement caused pain to shoot through his body.

Another burst of gunfire, this time a booming explosion following it.

"Mitchell," Noah breathed as his heart raced in anticipation. Had he actually come? Muffled screams sounded from outside of his door, followed by something that sounded suspiciously like a cat-like roar.

Yes! It was Mitchell! Noah forced himself out of the bed and staggered the few steps to his door. Pulling on the locked handle, he started scream, "In here! Get me out!"

By now, it sounded like all hell was breaking loose on the outside, the explosions and gunfire coming at a steady rate. Noah started to pound on

the door. "Please, Mitchell!"

The screaming played havoc on his lungs and he started to cough, the tangy taste of blood filling his mouth. Just as he'd begun to give up hope, a muffled voice called through the door.

"Stand back, I'm coming in."

Noah dragged himself out of the way right before someone kicked in the door. Blinking up into the gun smoke-filled air, Noah stared at what had to be one the biggest men he'd ever seen. With blond hair and icy blue eyes, he would have been scary had it not been for the concerned expression on his face. "Mitchell?" Noah coughed.

"No, my name is Seth. But I can take you to your brother."

Strong arms scooped him up and Noah found himself carried out of that horrible room. He let out a low moan of pain as he buried his face in Seth's chest. Noah still got a good eyeful of all the carnage surrounding him.

Bodies were scattered in all directions and blood seemed to be everywhere. Numerous soldiers, all of who wore the same uniform as Seth, ran around, freeing captives. Noah took some comfort in the fact that it appeared the battle was over and his side had actually won for once.

"Here comes Mitchell right now," Seth soothed.

Noah let out a gasp of shock as four large Jaguars came loping up. Just as they approached

him, they morphed into four men. One of them was smaller than the others and Noah recognized him as the guy from the day before.

"He's been asking for you," Seth said to the biggest man.

Mitchell moved forward and took Noah from Seth. As soon as he settled in Mitchell's arms, Noah felt safe for the first time since he could remember. "I knew it," he whispered. The pain in his lungs was getting worse, but he didn't care. All that mattered was he was going home.

"What was that?" Mitchell asked as he held Noah gingerly against his chest.

"I knew you would come for me." Noah took one last rattling breath before he succumbed to the darkness.

## CHAPTER TEN

Four days. That's how long Mitchell had sat by Noah's bedside and prayed that his brother would wake up.

They had stopped calling him Joel once Ranger had filled them in on how much he despised his birth name. Not that it bothered Mitchell. Hell, he'd call the kid Shirley if he wanted. All that mattered is that he opened his damn eyes.

"Here, I brought you some food," Dean said as he came into the room and set a tray on a nearby table. "I made sure to bring enough for everyone."

Mitchell hadn't been the only one keeping vigil. The entire family had refused to leave. Even Logan, Daniel and Carson had stayed. Most importantly to Mitchell, so had Dean.

Dean had been his support, his strength during the long hours and Mitchell had never loved his mate more.

"Has Doc Featherstone been in today?" Dean

asked.

"Yeah, he said the same thing he did yesterday. That it's just a waiting game." Mitchell reached down to stroke Noah's hair. A strange thing occurred to him, making him give a small chuckle. "He doesn't dye his hair."

"Is that a big deal?"

"Yeah, it means that he's probably going to be a black Jaguar like Logan."

"I thought that was very rare." Dean started getting the food ready on the tray, no doubt so he could force Mitchell to eat, something he'd been doing every day.

"It's extremely rare, but I guess I shouldn't be too shocked. Noah's already proven he's one of a kind."

Brent came into the room. With dark rimmed eyes and a haggard complexion, he looked just as worn out as Mitchell felt. "Daniel just came back from the search mission."

"Any luck on finding the Raven who was holding Noah?" Mitchell gripped the bed rails, wishing it was the bird's neck. His only regret about this rescue mission was that the Raven hadn't been there when they'd attacked. He would have loved to have made the bastard pay for hurting Noah.

"Nothing," Brent spat out bitterly. "The good news is the rest of Adam's pack has sworn



allegiance to Chris, so we won't have to worry about them anymore."

"It's not like they had a choice. Not since Chris was the one who killed Adam in the first place. Pack law dictates they follow Chris now," Dean said.

"At least we don't have to worry about them. We have enough to deal with already with the Ravens." Brent walked over and started to pick at some of the food on the tray.

Jacyn walked over from the main part of the infirmary. He carried a fresh IV bag and he went over to Noah's bedside to trade it out. Just as he was getting ready to toss out the old one, he looked down and smiled. "Well, look who finally decided to wake up."

Hope surged through Mitchell as he looked over for himself. When he saw Noah blinking back at him, Mitchell almost let out a sob of joy. "Damn it, kid. You had us scared there for a while."

"Sorry," Noah rasped, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Don't be, we're just happy to have you awake." Mitchell blinked back tears as he reached out with shaky hands to brush Noah's hair out of his face.

"Did Ranger and the rest of my friends get out, too?"

"Yes, they're all okay and in another room,

recovering. None of them were half as bad off as you."

Noah winced. "It still hurts."

"That's to be expected," Jacyn rushed to assure him. "You had broken ribs and a punctured lung, plus several other injuries. If you want, I can ask Doc Featherstone if he has anything for the pain."

Noah shook his head. "No more drugs, please."

"Whatever you want," Mitchell said.

That seemed to placate Noah because he gave a tiny smile. After that, the room became alive with activity as the rest of the family rushed forward to greet Noah. Since he didn't want to overwhelm the kid, Mitchell stepped to the back of the room.

A sense of pride went through him as he watched his family. While they may drive him crazy at times, deep down, he knew he was the luckiest man alive and he wouldn't have traded them for anything in the world.

Dean came over and wrapped his arms around Mitchell, completing the near-perfect moment. "Now all I need to do is find Andy and I'll have all my brothers home," Mitchell said before he kissed the top of Dean's head.

"You'll find him. I have complete confidence in you," Dean replied as he snuggled into Mitchell's chest.

For the first time, Mitchell allowed himself to believe that compliment. While he may never be

as good as a leader as his dad, he finally did have confidence in his own abilities. Over half of the lost shifters had been found, they had good leads on most of the ones still missing and the coalition had never been stronger.

Brent made some joke that had everyone around the beside cracking up.

Dean shook his head. "And to think, I worried I would miss all the activity of the pack life."

Mitchell pulled back so he could gaze down at Dean. "Are you sure you're not going to miss them?"

Dean smiled, his gaze full of love. "Of course not. I have everything I need right here."

Mitchell couldn't remember a time where he'd ever been so happy. "So, you have no regrets."

"Not anymore," Dean said before he tilted his head up for a kiss.

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