

Noah endured a year of harsh captivity by the Ravens before finally being rescued by his fellow feline shifters. Scarred in more ways than one and traumatized, he's trying to settle into a new life with the family he never knew he had. Too many bad memories and fears are making the transition less than easy, however. Even though his siblings claim to care about him, Noah feels that because of his haunted past, he's unworthy of their devotion.

Only one thing brings him any sense happiness, a tiger shifter named Seth. The problem is, Seth is the complete opposite of Noah. A soldier in every sense of the word, he's strong, sexy and honorable. Noah knows the other man is out of his league, so he vows to keep his feelings a secret.

Then one day Seth offers to help Noah learn how to defend himself. Even though Noah knows he should refuse, he agrees. His driving need to not be weak anymore and his deep feelings for Seth make the temptation too much to resist. But in getting closer to Seth, will Noah be in danger of losing his heart? The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

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A Wicked Caress Copyright © 2010 Stephani Hecht ISBN: 978-1-55487-607-5 Cover art by Angela Waters

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Published by eXtasy Books Look for us online at: www.eXtasybooks.com

A Wicked Caress Lost Shifter Series Book Five

By

8†ЕРНАЛІ НЕСНТ

CHAPTER ONE

As a kid, Noah had loved *Sesame Street*. He'd plant his ass on the threadbare carpet of Mrs. Miller's living room and lose himself in the land of letters and numbers. Gone were the troubles of not having parents or anyone who gave a damn about him. Instead, he could briefly pretend he lived on that street with furry monsters and happy storeowners.

One of his favorite things about the show had been the music. One song in particular, *One of These Things is Not Like Other Things*. Probably because it could have been the anthem for his fucked up life. Even before he'd outgrown the *Pampers* and *Gerbers*, he'd instinctively known he was different from everyone. Somehow off. An unwilling pretender.

At first, he thought those feelings came from being an orphan and having no roots to base his life on. Then as he got older, he wondered if perhaps it had to do with him being gay. It wasn't until nearly two years ago that he'd learned the real reason.

Boy had it thrown him for a fucking loop, too.

Okay, maybe he never expected those missing roots to be so...unexpected. Still, when he found out who he really was—what he really was—he'd never felt more different. Seriously though, how could one prepare themselves to find out that they weren't human at all, but a feline shifter?

As if that hadn't been enough, Noah had discovered that he had a real family out there. A family that had been searching for him. One that had the military power and training to destroy a small nation. He also discovered that his oldest brother was the leader of the feline coalition. Another brother had a love for explosives, plus a third one had an uncanny knack for mishandling firearms and shooting innocent bystanders.

Yeah, he bet Thanksgiving was a real blast in his new home.

As he sat at the huge ass dinner table in his prodigal family's living quarters, Noah tried his best to put on a happy face, all the while covertly studying his siblings and wondering how in hell he'd ever manage to fit in with this odd group.

Thankfully, the only ones there for lunch were he and his two older brothers, Brent and Mitchell. Although the two large men were both from the same litter, and yes, that's the word they used, litter. Mitchell was the one who led the coalition and ran the family while Brent was the one who liked to play with anything that went *boom*. Both of them had the same hair, a medium brown with darker brown speckles in it. Mitchell wore his a bit shorter, but they both had what one would call regulation cuts.

In other words, they were true soldiers—built like brick houses and with the whole don't-mess-with-me attitude. Noah on the other hand filled out the role of thin, scrawny and weak, perfectly. His buddy, Ranger, had once called him a *twink's twink* and even though it stung, Noah had to admit he had a point.

Luckily for him, at the moment, Brent and Mitchell were talking business so they weren't paying him any attention. That meant that Noah could continue to study the two men who were supposedly his blood relation, unnoticed.

"When are Jacyn and Logan supposed to be back from their mission?" Brent asked Mitchell.

Jacyn was yet another brother. He came from the middle litter, which still made him older than Noah. He also shared the same hair and eye coloring as the others. The only one who didn't was Noah. While he had brown eyes, he'd been cursed with black hair. Not dark brown, but a true black. So dark that in some lighting, it almost appeared blue. When he'd asked Mitchell why he looked differently, it had earned him a close-eyed look and a don't worry about that now.

He did worry about it though, because it was yet another thing that set him apart from the others. As he stirred his soup, he wondered if he'd ever feel like he belonged somewhere.

"They're supposed to be back tonight. Not only that, the Alpha team should be pulling in soon, too. So, it's going to be a busy night," Mitchell answered.

As Noah continued to stir his soup, he had never felt more small and insignificant. Everyone would be busy, but him. They didn't trust the weak, black sheep of the family to do anything. So the most pressing thing Noah had was deciding what car he'd be driving in *Mario Kart*.

A lull in the conversation brought him out of his musings and he glanced up in horror to see Brent and Mitchell looking down the long table at him. Mitchell's face remained as unreadable as always while the corner's of Brent's lips were twitching. Noah let out a loud gulp. "Sorry, did I miss something?"

"Besides you singing a kiddy song—no," Brent replied, his voice light and almost teasing. "I can't figure out which one it was though."

"It was *One of These Things is Not Like Other Things,*" Mitchell supplied blandly.

Shocked that a bad ass like Mitchell actually knew that, Noah jumped. His embarrassment went up another level when his spoon hit the bowl with a loud clatter. Not wanting to come off as an even bigger loser, he pasted on a fake smile. After all, false grins and assurances that he was okay was something he'd learned to excel in over the past six months. "I guess I was just reliving my childhood."

When Mitchell and Brent's expressions turned concerned, Noah immediately regretted that statement. Eager to smooth things over, he said, "Not all of it was bad. When I turned six, they sent me to live with this older lady named Mrs. Miller. I liked it there a lot."

"Tell me about her," Mitchell urged.

With anyone else, Mitchell would have almost barked the order, but with Noah, he took a gentler, soothing tone. While Noah knew his brother meant well, the kid-glove act still annoyed him. He was almost twenty-four years old for crap's sake. It's not as if he was still the same kid who used to hide in the back of his closet and tremble in fear all the time.

"I was the only foster child in her house, so she always had time for me. She didn't have much money, but it didn't matter because she somehow managed to make sure to do things to let me feel special. For my eighth birthday, she took me to the beach." He smiled as a warm feeling settled in his stomach. "I got so sunburned that day."

"So you were with her for a few years then?" Brent asked.

"Yeah, until I was twelve." That warm feeling dissipated, leaving behind a cold brick.

"Why did they move you?" Brent pressed.

Noah ground his teeth together. Even though he knew that question had been coming, it didn't mean he welcomed it. "She died from a heart attack. I was at school at the time, so I couldn't help her. My principle called me into the office and told me about it. After that, they sent me to Karin. That was my last home."

Mitchell and Brent did say anything about that.

Not that Noah had expected them to. The years between his running away from foster care and his captivity had always been a taboo subject. Which was fine by him since the last thing he wanted was to relive that time of his life.

"I was with her for two years before her latest boyfriend decided he liked me better than her. After a while, I got sick of being his plaything, so I took off."

It wasn't until he saw the pained expression on Brent's face that Noah realized what he'd just admitted. Noah glanced back down at his bowl as he cursed himself for his stupidity. You just had to go and open your big mouth, didn't you? You can bet nothing like that would ever happen to Brent or Mitchell. They would have fought back. Found some

way to get away.

The worst part of it was Noah didn't know for sure how much his family knew about his past or about the abuse he'd suffered from Karin's boyfriend. Any more than he could be certain that they didn't know what he'd been forced to do to survive once he'd found himself homeless and on the streets.

Since the feline coalition had more resources than most human military bases did...or at least he assumed they did since he'd never been on one...Noah guessed they had all kinds of resources. So it probably wouldn't take much for them to pull up his old arrest record and see all the kinds of naughty things he'd been up to in the past few years.

A hand on the back of his neck made him look up. Brent had somehow managed to get up and approach without Noah hearing. They locked gazes, Brent being all serious for once. Noah knew some special *After School Special* speech was coming his way. Fuck, he didn't want this. If he wanted to vent his feelings, he'd have taken the coalition doctor's offer to talk with the resident psychologist. Really though, who in the hell ever heard of a kitty head-shrinker? If Noah got too upset in a session, would the guy toss him a ball of yarn to bat around until he calmed down? He sucked in a breath as he waited for Brent's it-will-

all-be-okay spiel.

Instead, Brent gave Noah's neck a gentle squeeze before he said, "I'm getting ready to head down to the training facility. You want to go with me?"

Noah released the breath as relief flooded him. "That depends. Are you planning on kicking my ass again?"

It had just been recently that Mitchell had given the okay for Noah to get some battle training and only then, it had been on the condition that Brent take it easy. Even with those restrictions, Noah had suffered through the indignity of having his ass handed to him.

Brent gave a crooked smile that never reached his eyes. "Of course I plan on wiping the mat with you. What else are big brothers for?"

Yeah, because nothing would make him feel like he belonged more than another example of how he didn't measure up. Knowing there would be no getting out of it, Noah rolled his eyes as he picked up his bowl. "Fine...just don't give me a noogie, then scream out who's your daddy, this time. People tend to stare when you do that."

"They do?" Brent cocked a brow.

"Yeah, especially when you slap your own ass and wiggle your hips like a go-go dancer on speed."

"I promise to only do a small victory dance this

time."

"Gee, thanks," Noah deadpanned as he got up to take his dish to the kitchen. As he rinsed his bowl, he could just barely make out Mitchell's low tone.

"Make sure you don't push Noah too hard. He's still not fully healed."

Noah made a face as he turned off the water. Even though he knew Mitchell meant well, Noah still didn't like the reminder of how weak and pitiful he was. It's not as if he didn't get a healthy dose of that reality every morning when he looked in the mirror and saw all the scars from his year of captivity.

He realized he started humming that damn song again. This time it was around a painful lump in his throat because he worried that no matter how many times Brent took him to that damn training facility, he'd never be able to live up to their expectations.

* * * *

For the first time in his life, Seth didn't want to have to see yet another sweaty, half-naked man. Which just shocked the hell out of him, but he couldn't help it. After getting back from the mission from hell, all he wanted was a hot shower and to sleep in his own bed.

Yet, he found his ass going to the training facility where there were to be plenty of perspiration and nudity because he had to report to his commanding officer and that just happened to be where he'd been told Brent was.

He found his commander in the middle of one of the training mats, breaking in some green recruit. Seth let out a low grunt of sympathy for the poor sap. He still could vividly recall his own training under Brent's boots and it had been anything but easy.

Since Brent had the newbie pinned to the mat, all Seth could see was a pair of legs kicking for purchase. They were small and had only a little bit of muscle mass to them, but that would soon change as the recruit went through the grueling training and built up some bulk.

Seth smiled as he watched the legs continue to struggle. Having been on the bottom of this lesson so many times himself, he knew how it would end. Brent would just hold the guy down until he stilled and finally admitted defeat. A humiliating lesson, yes, but it also served to show that one sometimes had to rely on their wit more than brawn.

So it shocked the hell out of Seth when Brent got up after only a few moments. Hell, he even held out a hand to pull the recruit to his feet. Seth cocked a brow at the odd behavior. Brent never went easy on trainees. In the real world, the felines had to be well prepared as they faced many hostile shifters, Jackals, Hyenas, other felines who'd gone rogue and importantly, Ravens.

Over the past few decades Ravens had become the biggest threat of all. Seth gave an internal shudder as he thought about that horrible night, a little over twenty years ago, when he'd lost everyone he cared about to the Ravens when the birds had mounted a mass attack on several feline homes. He hadn't been the only one who had suffered either. The death toll had devastating to the feline numbers, plus they had also lost hundreds of their youngest. Children who were thought dead until just recently when it had been discovered that they'd been rescued by Hawk shifters and scattered amongst the human population.

Now, under Mitchell's guidance, the felines were slowly finding their lost kin and bringing them back home. Mitchell, himself, had found three of his own missing brothers, Jacyn, Keegan, and Noah.

Seth clenched his hands into hard fists as he thought about his own missing brother, Owen. Since his name was amongst the list the Hawks provided the felines, Seth now knew his younger sibling was out there somewhere, waiting to be found. Pain sliced through his chest as he

wondered what Owen might be going through. How he may be suffering as he tried to make his way in the hostile human world. Seth didn't care what anyone said, as far as he was concerned, humans were the biggest animals of all. Since the coalition worked under the human government in trying to stop such scum as terrorists and drug runners, he came into contact with some of the worst mankind had to offer.

A voice cut into his thoughts. "Hey, you look ready to kill somebody. What happened, did Carson send you another *Tigger* video card?"

Seth smiled as he recognized the raspy tone of Thomas—a Lion shifter and a damn good soldier. Seth respected the guy and the man was one of the few that he trusted to protect his back during missions. "Yes, he sent me two just today. I would have thought since he took Keegan as a mate and moved into Mitchell's family quarters, Carson would grow up some, but some things never change."

Carson, a Cheetah and the resident IT guy, just loved to rile others up. Since Seth's animal form was a Tiger, that meant the jerk loved to call him *Tigger* and asked how *the bouncing was going*. Carson didn't just save the insults for Seth either. He loved to throw them Thomas's way, too. How he had the balls to taunt someone who stood at over six-four and had the muscle mass of a bull,

shocked Seth. Even *he* didn't like to tangle with Thomas since the guy had to be the strongest and meanest fighter in their coalition. Add on the fact that Thomas wore his blond hair in a short buzz cut and his sharp blue-eyed stare could make even the Ravens squirm in discomfort, Seth had to wonder if Carson had a death wish.

Thomas flicked a glance at Seth. "I see you have a new hair-do. Going for the whole Goth look?"

Seth ran a hand through his short hair in a self-conscious move. While it normally was a near white blond, he'd been forced to dye it black. "I had to go undercover for this last mission," he explained.

"How did it go?"

Seth shrugged. "Okay. You know how it is, having to deal with the humans. They expected us to do all the dirty work while they stood back and took all the glory."

Thomas grunted in agreement as they both returned their attention to the mat.

Seth had yet to see who the recruit was since Brent stood between them. Brent seemed to be deep in a lecture although Seth was too far away to make out any of the words. Just as Seth started to get bored, Brent moved to the side and Seth finally got a good look at the trainee.

All the air left his lungs in one whoosh as he found himself gazing at Noah. It had been months

since Seth had seen the young Jaguar shifter and then that had been during Noah's rescue. Since Noah had been close to death at that time, he hadn't exactly been at his best.

Seth had to admit the kid looked better—much, much better. His skin had taken on a healthy tan tone instead of the gray, sickly pallor from before. He'd filled out some, too. While he was nowhere as muscular as the feline soldiers, he wasn't rail thin either. His hair remained the same though—raven in color and long in the front so his bangs hung over his amber eyes. It reminded Seth of how a feral animal would look like if it had been backed into a corner. Equal parts...dangerous and vulnerable.

Not that Noah gave off the same kick-ass vibe as Thomas or Brent. In fact, it would be very easy to dismiss the Jaguar as unthreatening due to his small size and obvious lack of battle skills. It was only when Seth looked closer that he saw it—the unwavering will to survive. While he didn't know for sure all of what Noah had gone through, Seth would be willing to bet it hadn't been easy and the only reason the kid had survived had been from sheer stubbornness. This made the fact that Brent had been going so easy on him all the more frustrating. "Why is Brent holding back?"

Thomas frowned. "Probably because the kid has only had six months to heal up from his captivity. He did almost die, after all."

Like Seth could forget that. How he'd kicked down the door to Noah's cell to find the Jaguar bleeding and rasping out his last breaths in that dank, smelling room. Or the way Noah had gazed up at him, those amber eyes full of pain. Seth hadn't even thought twice before he'd bent down to scoop Noah up in his arms. That had proved to be one of the biggest mistakes of his life because he still laid awake at nights, thinking of how perfectly the smaller man's body had fitted against him. This just proved how twisted he was to be lusting after someone as they lay dying in his arms. "He seems to have healed up just fine. So that doesn't explain why Brent is treating him like he's made from glass," Seth argued.

Almost as if to prove his point, Brent started to spar with Noah. Even from the distance, Seth could clearly see Brent pulling back his punches. "Does Brent think the Ravens are going to be this easy on Noah if they try to get their claws on him again?"

Thomas let out a humorless chuckle. "I keep forgetting that you've been away for most of the past six months, so you haven't seen the way both Mitchell and Brent are around the kid."

Kid. Even though Seth had used that very word himself to describe Noah, somehow it didn't really seem fitting. While Noah may be small,

inexperienced and not even have gone through his first shift yet, the way he danced around the mat seemed to scream *all man*. He had a graceful way of moving that told Seth, with more training, he'd be able, to at least hold his own long enough in a fight to be able to get away.

Then he noticed Noah didn't wear the coalition uniform, which struck him as even more odd. The first thing Mitchell had done when he got Jacyn and Keegan home was slap the black camouflage on them and start some serious training.

"Don't they think Noah is worthy to be in their ranks?" Seth asked, his voice sharper than he intended. That earned him an arched brow glance from Thomas.

"No, they just don't want to see him get hurt again. It's the strangest thing, Seth. I've never seen either one of those two show fear before. Not even the night after the mass Raven attack and Mitchell had to take over leadership of the coalition because his father was killed. Now with Noah, it's like they can't control their worries as far as he's concerned. They're terrified to even let Noah out of their sights. Almost as if they expect him to go missing again if they're not careful enough."

"Going light on his training is the last thing they should be doing then," Seth snapped as he watched Brent lightly cuff Noah on the head. "If he goes against a real Raven, the bird isn't going to give him tickle punches like Brent's doing right now."

"Whatever you do, don't try to approach Noah and train him yourself. You'll be lucky to make it out alive if Brent or Mitchell catches you talking to him."

Now it was Seth who raised a brow. "They don't like him socializing?"

"Not unless it's with their family or close circle of insiders."

That one Seth could almost understand. Seth's cock swelled to life as he noted the way Noah's dark lashes framed the most alluring eyes, how his cheekbones arched just perfectly and that his pouty lips just begged to be kissed. If he noticed how tempting the newest addition was, then it was a good bet the other males in the coalition had, too. Since nearly every feline happened to be bisexual by nature, that would mean Noah would have nearly every member gunning for his attention.

Thomas let out a low whistle. "Word of advice, buddy. Whatever you do, don't let the Jaguar brothers catch you looking at Noah that way."

"What way?" Seth didn't glance over as he asked the question, too intent on watching Noah move across the mat. Shit, despite the lack of training, he nearly danced when he moved.

"Like he's a num-num and you're looking for a

treat."

That comment finally did earn Thomas a glare. "Did you actually just say *num-num*? What's next *yummy* or *tummy*?"

"Fuck you."

"No thanks, we tried that before and it didn't work because neither one of us wanted to give up control to the other. Remember?"

"Look, all I'm saying is, if you know what's good for you, you'll keep your paws to yourself as far as Noah is concerned. The kid has trouble scrawled all over him."

"Not a problem. I have no interest in complications and I have a feeling that's all Noah would be." Even as Seth spoke those words, a fresh spike of desire shot through his body. A fine sheen of perspiration had built up on Noah's upper lip and Seth had the most insane desire to lick it away.

A low groan slipped past his lips. Even though he was too far away to have possibly heard it, Noah chose that moment to look in Seth's direction. Their gazes met and locked. Seth stood there, like some green idiot, paralyzed as the strangest sense of possessiveness went through him. Although he had no rights and despite the fact he and Noah hadn't spoken more than a handful of words to each other, Seth had to fight himself from going over, throwing the smaller

man over his shoulder and carrying him off to the nearest bedroom.

Perhaps Noah felt the same thing because he took a step in Seth's direction. Unfortunately, at that same moment, Brent lobbed another punch at Noah. Even thought the blow had been as light as the previous ones, Brent obviously hadn't counted on Noah moving, because his fist connected with a solid *clunk*.

Noah went down hard, his body hitting the mat with a smack so loud it echoed through the noisy room. An expression of horror and guilt marred Brent's usually more easygoing face as he dropped to his knees by his brother.

"Shit, we better get out of here before Brent figures out who distracted Noah's attention," Thomas urged as he tugged on Seth's arm.

"Is he okay?" Worry nearly burned a hole in Seth's gut as he gazed over at Noah. When the Jaguar sat up and gave a weak smile, Seth let out a sigh of relief.

"He's fine, but you won't be if Brent gets a hold of you."

Seth still resisted. "I'm supposed to give a report to Brent, about the mission."

"You can do it later, after he's had time to calm down."

Thomas tugged him again and this time Seth relented and went along. On the way out, he

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couldn't resist looking one last time over his shoulder though.

CHAPTER TWO

Noah turned over in bed and let out a soft moan when his tender jaw rubbed against the pillow. Not that he hadn't taken plenty of punches before, but damn, none of them had packed a wallop like Brent's had.

He sat up and swung his feet over the side of the bed. His face just ached too much to allow him to relax enough to drift off. Not that he would have slept for long anyhow. The past three weeks he'd been lucky to get more than three hours a night. As a result, he'd been battling almost mindnumbing exhaustion all the while, trying to hide his predicament from his brothers and Cassie.

Sweat had beaded on his forehead and when Noah reached up to wipe it away, he noticed his hand shook with fear. Damn, this was fucked up, even for him—afraid to go to sleep because the boogey man might jump up and get him.

Sadly enough, however, there really lurked a

real sinister baddie that had a hard-on for him. A year and a half ago, Noah and a few of his friends had been taken captive by an exiled band of wolf shifters and their Raven leader. A shiver of dread slid down Noah's spine as he thought about the Raven. Evil all the way to his gooey center, he'd forced Noah to call him *Master*. Not only that, but he'd subjected Noah to all kinds of sadistic treatment. Noah still carried the scars, both inside and out, from that year of hell.

He rubbed his fingers over his knees, the raised knotted flesh mocking him. Not that they were his worst scars physically, but they cut him the deepest because of how he got him. He clamped his lips together to hold back a sob as he recalled the hours he been forced to stay on his knees, the cold, hard uneven ground of his cell digging into his flesh. Even now, he could feel the painful ache from the degradation, the stain of humiliation still as fresh as it had been when he'd been forced to...

Noah shook his head. No, that was all behind him. He refused to let what Master had done to him in that damn cell carry over to his new life. Still, he knew it would be useless trying to go back to bed. So, Noah did what he'd done every other night for the previous few weeks—he got up, then slipped into a pair of jeans and t-shirt. After he shoved his feet into a pair of Vans, he quietly opened the door to his room.

As he silently stole down the hall, he kept his ears open for any of the other house members. While there were a couple of more interesting noises from the rooms of the mated residents, that only meant they'd be too occupied with each other to hear any sounds he might make.

Once he reached the front door of the apartment, Noah slowly released the pent up breath he'd been holding. Once he stepped outside into the larger confines of the feline headquarters, he even allowed himself to smile.

He knew it was wrong, him sneaking out in the middle of the night like this, but it's not as if he'd go wandering the streets of Flint or anything. He had no plans to go outside at all. He just needed to get away from all the stress and clear his head for a while. He'd found the best way to do that was to take long walks around the inside of the building.

Given the late hour, only a skeleton crew was moving around and they barely gave Noah any notice as he passed them. One thing he'd quickly learned when he'd come here was that, while everyone went out of their way to be polite to him, not many really seemed motivated to become his new BFF. Noah frowned as he shoved his hands in his front pockets. He wondered if it had to do with all the bad things he'd done in his past. Yet again, the fear that they all already knew about his jaded history hit him. That sure would account for all

the cold shoulders he'd been getting. It probably disgusted them that their precious coalition leader had a younger brother who used to whore himself out for a few bucks.

Alternatively, maybe it was the fact that he'd served as the Master's bitch for twelve months. The felines made it no secret that they despised Ravens and maybe they considered Noah tainted somehow.

Noah let out a depressed sigh as he turned into the training center. While he could deal with the indifference, the lack of physical contact was killing him. He missed the benefits of consensual fun and games. Despite everything he'd gone through, he's always loved sex and he couldn't recall the last time he'd had a good, hard fuck. Even Ranger and his other buddies that he'd known before they were captured wouldn't give Noah the time of day as far as sex went anymore.

As he stepped into the training area and realized he wasn't alone, a huge grin spread out over Noah's face. Speaking of sex, there stood in front of him the poster boy for gonna-give-me-aboner.

Seth!

Noah let out a low purr of appreciation as he watched the Tiger go through a slow series of martial arts moves. Damn, Noah must have done something in a previous life to deserve a reward,

too, because Seth also happened to be naked from the waist up.

His cock let out a loud, *yippy skippy* as he watched beads of sweat slowly travel down the man's muscular body. Muscles that Noah would give his left nut to lick. He would take his time, too, letting his tongue slowly learn every dip and ridge of the Seth's body. He'd give even more to be the reason the usually stalwart soldier's control slipped. Just one moan of passion—that's all Noah asked for. Okay, maybe that and a little tug of the hair as he sucked the man off.

"Are you going to stand there staring at me all night?" Seth asked as he turned that ice-blue stare in Noah's direction.

Noah found himself momentarily paralyzed, shocked that Seth had known all along that he'd been there. Finally recovering, he shot off what he hoped was a cocky grin. "That depends. Are you planning on taking off any more clothes?"

Seth continued to glare silently.

Noah persisted, "Seriously, I would be willing to stand here for the rest of the night so long as you promised to drop your pants at some point."

Seth's gaze narrowed ever so slightly. "Are you usually this mouthy?"

"Only when I see something I want to wrap said mouth around," Noah shot back. Part of him realized he'd probably earn himself a beat-down

for his smartass attitude, but he couldn't stop himself. It felt so damn good to be doing some reckless flirting for once. It had been so long, he'd been afraid he'd lost his touch.

"I don't think you're big enough to take in anything I have to offer," Seth returned with a dismissive glance over Noah's scrawny body.

Despite the insult, Noah wanted to give the air a fist pump in celebration. All the other felines had walked away from him before they let him get this far. Not Seth though. Even though he acted annoyed, the fact that he stayed and continued the conversation let Noah know the Tiger was having a little fun of his own. Noah made a big show of slowly running his tongue over his lips. "You'd be surprised at what I can take. I've been told that I'm remarkably flexible."

Seth took a step forward as he cocked his head slightly to the side. "Really? And who exactly told you this?"

It was an obvious attempt to call Noah's bluff. While Noah could have given him a couple of names, instead, he made a dismissive wave of his hand. "People are always throwing compliments my way. It got to be so tiresome that I put a poll up on *Facebook* so people could vote on my best attributes. My flexibility came in at a close second." That finally earned him a hint of a smile.

"Okay, even though I know I'm going to regret

asking this, what came in first?"

By way of answer, Noah turned around and wiggled his ass a couple of times. The last thing he expected to get was a snort of disbelief from Seth.

"I wouldn't rank that higher than fifth. Hell, it may even be sixth."

Outraged, Noah turned around to shoot off a dirty look only to see that Seth was smiling at him. Not willing to be bested, he gave his moneymaker another shake. "Are you certain you don't want to come over here and feel it? You know, to be sure you've truly been able to size it up."

"I can appreciate it just fine from over here, thanks," Seth replied dryly.

Knowing he'd been beat on this one point, Noah turned back around. "You're hair is a different color. Why?"

Surprise flickered in Seth's eyes. "I didn't think you even remembered me."

Noah frowned. "Of course I remember you. It was you who carried me out of that damn room they held me in. You saved my life."

"Not really. You're brothers were there, too."

"But you were the one who heard me screaming for help and kicked down the door to get to me." Noah shivered a little as he recalled the fear and despair of that moment. How much pain he'd been in from all his injuries. Then just as he'd given up all hope, there stood over him a tall,

blond-haired hero.

Noah eyed up Seth's military cut. While the new darker color was nice, he much preferred Seth's natural color. He hoped the man changed it back soon. Praying that everything else remained as wonderful as Noah had remembered, he stepped closer to Seth so he could take in a deep breath. A satisfied warmth went through him as he detected the same woodsy scent that he'd come to associate with Seth.

"What are you doing?" Seth asked as his body grew tense.

Undaunted, Noah moved in even more so their bodies were inches apart. "Isn't it obvious? I'm sniffing you."

Seth still didn't pull back, but he didn't relax either. "Why?"

"Because I like how you smell, of course. You sure do ask dumb questions sometimes." Noah tried to move closer yet, only to have Seth stiffarm him in the chest.

"No, stupid is throwing yourself at someone you hardly know," Seth replied in a hard voice that nearly broke through Noah's cocky shield.

The reaction did disappoint him though. Either he'd really gotten out of practice or Seth was just like the others and disgusted by Noah. He let out a small laugh to hide the hurt. "I already know a lot about you, Seth." He did, too....well, kind of. The first thing he'd done once he'd recovered enough to leave the infirmary had been to ask anyone who'd talk to him about his tall, blond savior. Noah had been surprised at first at how short the information had been. Then he'd come to the realization that nobody knew much about Seth.

"Okay, then tell me. What did the little, curious Jaguar find out?" Seth still had a hand on Noah's chest, almost as if he didn't trust Noah not to make another move on him.

"Your family kept to themselves before the attack. That is, until you lost everyone close to you, then you came to Mitchell and joined the coalition." Noah swallowed hard, hoping his words didn't bring up too many painful memories for Seth.

Finally, Seth closed the distance between them, but it wasn't in the intimate gesture Noah had desired. No, the move seemed aggressive, almost hostile. Noah swallowed a gasp as he tried to retreat only to have Seth jerk him back by the front of his shirt.

At last, Noah found himself pressed against that hard body he wondered about for so long. Instead of the thrill of desire though, he felt a sharp spike of fear as he gazed into Seth's icy stare. "Sorry," he rushed out in an attempt to diffuse the situation.

"I could snap you in half right now and there is nothing you could do about it. You couldn't even fight back because you're brothers haven't fucking trained you properly."

The insult to Brent and Mitchell brought Noah's own anger out. "Don't you talk about them that way. They've taken good care of me."

Seth fisted his hand even tighter in Noah's shirt and lifted.

Noah let out an angry cry as he found himself being lifted so the tips of his toes barely grazed the mat.

"No, they've coddled you to the point of negligence."

Noah tried to break free, only to find that Seth had him in a firm iron grip and wouldn't be letting go until he was damn good and ready. Realizing this, Noah lashed out with the only weapon he had, his brother's influence. "You can't hurt me. Mitchell won't allow it."

"Mitchell's not here, is he?"

An icy ball of dread clunked into Noah's belly as he wondered how long it would take for someone to get there if he screamed for help.

As if reading his mind, Seth gave a slow shake of his head. "I would crush your windpipe before you got even a peep out."

"Why are you doing this?" Noah asked. As far as he knew, Seth had always been one of Mitchell's most loyal soldiers. Seth, attacking like this, seemed completely at odds with everything he'd heard about the Tiger.

"Because I like you, Noah," Seth replied quietly.

Noah didn't even bother to hide his confusion. "If this is how you show affection, I would hate to see what happens when you hate somebody." Seth let go so quickly, Noah stumbled back a few steps.

"I was trying to prove a point, kid."

"What, that you can be an asshole? In that case, point taken." Noah smoothed out the wrinkles in his shirt. Now if it were only that easy to soothe his battered ego.

"You need to learn how to defend yourself and that means you need someone else to take over your training."

Noah paused, hand in mid-air. "Brent is one of the best at what he does. He's trained almost every soldier in the coalition."

"Yes, he was my teacher when I was a new recruit," Seth conceded. "But he's too close and overprotective of you."

"It's because I only got out of the infirmary a few months ago. You probably didn't know that since you've been on your mission so long."

"Then that means you've had plenty of time to heal up." Seth continued to miss Noah's point.

"Not really. I can't shift yet so I don't recover

from injuries as quick as you all can."

Seth stubbornly shook his head. "If it was any other recruit, Brent would have had him working twice as hard as you — pre-shift or not."

Noah's mouth opened in shock. How could he have ever thought Seth was so hot? "You are the biggest asshole I've ever met, and trust me, with some of the jerks I've dealt with in the past, that says a lot."

"I'm the only one who's willing to be truthful with you, kid. I'd say that makes me you're next best friend."

"Fuck you," Noah spat, angry that Seth had the gall to continue to disrespect Mitchell and Brent so much.

"No thanks," Seth deadpanned. "I said I was your friend, but that's as close as I'm willing to get to you."

Noah had suspected Seth's disgust all along, but hearing it said aloud like that hurt—bad. He turned away before his face gave him away and clenched his hands into fists so tight, his nails dug into the tender flesh his palms. "I don't have to listen to this shit." He'd made it halfway across the room.

Seth called, "Not even if I promise to tell you something that I know for a fact Mitchell is hiding from you?"

Even though Noah knew he should keep

moving, the temptation proved too great. He stopped, but didn't turn around. "What? That one of his top ranking soldiers is an asshole? I think I figured that one out myself."

"Put your bruised ego aside for one minute and listen closely because what I tell you may just very well save your life. I have some information on the Raven who held you prisoner."

Noah's heart hammered so hard, he wondered if Seth could actually hear it. "You mean, Master?"

"Is that what you called him?"

"It's what he insisted on. He never told me his real name."

"It's Declan and he's very high up in the ruling ranks of the Ravens—which makes him powerful as hell. Not only that, but Mitchell has tangled with him more than once before."

That made sense, Noah conceded to himself. The Raven had seemed pretty intent on taking down Mitchell, to the point where it seemed almost personal. Therefore, he could guess that maybe the animosity had come from being bested one on one. Noah just stood there and didn't say anything.

Seth continued, "Declan really has it bad for you."

A shiver of revulsion went through Noah as he recalled the Raven's almost daily visits. Even now, he could feel the Raven's wet pants on the back of

his neck. Hear the almost sensual promise of, You're so special. I think I may keep you for myself. "It must be my irresistible personality," Noah replied tartly, hoping to hide the bone-numbing fear coursing in his body.

"He wants you back and he's willing to do anything to accomplish that. So much so, that he's already put out a reward for whoever brings you in."

A small whimper of terror slipped past Noah's lips, shaming him. "That can't be true. Mitchell would have told me." Even as he spoke the denial, Noah flashed back on all the knowing, secretive looks his brothers had exchanged. Not to mention, the way they never let him go outside, not even to the loading dock.

"I have a feeling there's a lot Mitchell doesn't want you to know," Seth said, his voice much softer, almost apologetic.

Noah wasn't having any of it though. "Why do you have to be so mean?" He knew the comment sounded childish and petty, but at this point, he hurt too much to give a damn.

"You misunderstand my intentions. I couldn't ask for a better or more honorable leader than Mitchell and I will follow him to my last breath. I just know that his one and only weakness is his family, you especially, right now. He feels guilty that you almost died and he couldn't stop it, so,

it's only natural that he'd go too far in his efforts to protect you. Even the leader of the feline shifters has to deal with human sentimentality."

Noah closed his eyes against the swell of emotions threatening to overwhelm him. What Seth said did have a ring of truth to it. Mitchell, Brent, Cassie, Jacyn and Keegan had loved him when no one else ever had. In turn, Noah had let down his shields and learned to love them in return. So much so, that he would kill for them, so he could understand it if Mitchell felt the same protective urges.

"I come here and practice every night," Seth said.

"Good to know. You want a gold star for your dedication?" Noah snipped. Again—childish and petty, but he wasn't quite ready to play nice, yet.

"I just thought that if you want, you could come join me. I'd be willing to show you a few things and since I don't love you in the least, I won't hold back."

Noah finally turned and arched a brow. "Let me get this straight. Are you offering to train me?"

Seth gave a curt nod. "That is if you're not too afraid to come out and play with the big boys."

CHAPTER THREE

Seth slowly paced the long mat in the center of the training room as he waited to see if Noah would actually have the nerve to show up. His lips quirked into the beginnings of a smile. Actually, he felt pretty certain the bratty Jaguar would show. The only question was if it would be to train or to tell Seth off.

He recalled how fury had glinted in Noah's amber eyes as he'd defended his brothers. It had been obvious that, while he'd just recently become reacquainted with his family, he'd already grown attached to them. Seth idly wondered if his own brother, Owen, would develop the same kinship if he ever came home or if the separation had been too long for any hope of reconciliation.

A small whisper of movement let Seth know he was no longer alone. Shifting his head to the right, he spotted Noah standing hesitantly just inside the doorway. As always, when he saw the younger

man, it affected Seth in the rawest and most visceral of ways. Need, hunger, desire, affection and a sense of ownership, they were all present and each one confused Seth a little more than the previous one.

Why, after over two decades of self-imposed solitude, this small Jaguar called to Seth like no other, remained as much a mystery at that moment as it had six months ago. All he knew for certain was Thomas had been right about one thing, Noah spelled trouble with a capital *T*.

Noah took another hesitant step forward. Instead of the jeans he'd worn the previous night, black, baggy shorts and a red, hooded sweatshirt covered his small frame. His feet were still hampered down by the flimsy sneakers, but at least it was a slight improvement. One that clued Seth into the fact that Noah had come with the intent to work out something besides his mouth.

"I've been thinking about what you said," Noah's sex-filled, raspy voice finally broke the silence.

"Have you?" Seth replied simply, forcing Noah to continue to steer the conversation.

Noah frowned, something he did way too often for Seth's liking. Twisting his fingers in a nervous gesture, he shrugged. "It wouldn't hurt to train with you, too. Since I'm so far behind everyone else, some extra sessions would do me some good."

Seth nearly smiled at Noah's logic. While he couldn't seem to admit that Brent or Mitchell had been in the wrong, he also seemed willing to see the need for Seth's help. Seth wondered if Mitchell realized he had a budding diplomat in his ranks now. "I wasn't for sure you'd take me up on my offer," Seth admitted.

Noah looked up from under the fringe of his dark bangs. "Like you said, if he's coming back for me, I'm going to have to know how to protect myself."

It wasn't lost on Seth how Noah refused to speak Declan's name. "Do Mitchell and Brent know that you're here?"

"No, I was afraid that they wouldn't want me out without one of them."

Seth had to work hard to keep the look of outraged disbelief off his face. Had the Jaguar brothers really gone so far as not to let Noah walk even around headquarters without a bodyguard? "I'm surprised Mitchell hasn't tagged you with a tracking chip."

The corner of Noah's lips kicked up into a wry smile. "Actually, he wanted to put one in both Keegan and I, but the idea didn't go over too well."

"Let me guess...Carson told him where Mitchell could stick the chip and it wasn't

somewhere complimentary."

"Well, since Mitchell is his leader, Carson didn't go into that detailed of a response, but the gist was still there." Noah's grin grew wider.

As always, the sight of it made Seth's heart pick up speed. "So, they didn't know you were out last night either, I take it," Seth replied as he gave his body a silent *calm the fuck down*. The last thing he needed was for Noah to find out the affect he had on him.

"I wasn't doing anything wrong," Noah protested quickly, perhaps out of fear of Seth going to Mitchell. "I've just been having trouble sleeping and sometimes it helps if I get out of the apartment for a while."

As always, Seth almost laughed at the word apartment. Since Mitchell led the coalition, he lived on site in headquarters and because his family was so damn tight, they lived there, too. With so many bodies in one place, they need a ton of space. Their living quarters took up nearly the entire backside of the building and since it used to be a huge, rambling auto factory that said a lot. "Why can't you sleep?" Seth asked.

Noah hedged and refused to answer.

Seth came to his own conclusion. "Are you having nightmares?"

A flush came over Noah's high-arched cheeks as he ran a hand through the back of his hair in an

agitated gesture. "I guess that just shows how stupid I am. Letting a couple bad dreams keep me up for nights on end."

"There's nothing stupid about being afraid, Noah. We've all been there."

Noah gave Seth's body an up and down assessment. "I'll bet nothing scares you."

"Nothing could be further from the truth."

For a second, Noah hedged, almost as if he debated over what to say next. Then he gave a small sigh before plunging ahead. "I heard that you got captured by the Ravens, too."

"Yeah, when I went on the mission to locate Keegan and bring him to Mitchell." It had been one of Seth's biggest regrets, too. If Carson hadn't jumped in and rescued Keegan himself, the Ravens no doubt would have killed Keegan.

"Does it ever still bother you? You know...because of the way they treated you?" Noah's flush grew deeper. "What I mean is, I heard that you were laid up for a while because they really worked you over."

They had more than worked Seth over. They had tortured him within an inch of his life. If it hadn't been for Mitchell and Brent's quick rescue, Seth knew he would have just have been another causality in the war. "Yes, I still sometimes suffer from flashbacks and nightmares."

"Really?" Noah looked so relieved and

vulnerable.

It took all of Seth's self-control not to walk over and pull the Jaguar into a comforting embrace. "Yes, and they only had me for a few days. I can't even begin to imagine being under their control for a year like you were. It's a true testament to how strong you were to have even survived."

A noise that sounded suspiciously like a sob came from Noah before he covered it with a cough. "I wasn't the only one. I was with a group of friends when the Ravens showed up so they took us all captive."

True, but from what Seth had heard and seen during the rescue, none of them had suffered half as much as Noah had. "Then I guess that shows you have good judgment when it comes to picking out friends."

That made Noah give a strained laugh. "They were all just stray shifters like me. Ranger, he's a Wolf. It was him that kind of stumbled on us one by one. He'd bring us back and we all learned to watch out for each other."

The thought of a gang of young shifters from various breeds, banding together, intrigued Seth. "How many of you were there?"

"Let see," Noah started to tick off on his fingers.
"There was me, while Ranger knew I was feline, we didn't know I was Jaguar until after I was captured. Then of course, there was Ranger,

another feline shifter named, Trevor, plus, Gage, who's a Hawk. Oh, and then, Riley. He's an Eagle."

The last one made Seth grunt in surprise since Eagles were so rare they were almost to the point of extinct. "Wow, I don't remember an Eagle being there when we rescued you."

Noah shrugged. "Mitchell's been keeping it real low key. He's been trying to find out if Riley has any family still alive, but so far, not even Carson has been able to find anyone. So, Riley's been living with the same Hawk family that took in Gage."

"Where have the others been living?"

"Ranger lives with us since Dean promised to take care of him."

Dean was not only a wolf shifter, but he happened to be Mitchell's mate, which just proved that sometimes cats and dogs really do get along.

Noah continued, "Trevor has been living with some panthers named Kevin and Jared."

"Ah yes, Dumb and Ass." Seth smiled fondly as he thought about the mated pair of feline shifters.

"That's what Carson always calls them." Noah laughed.

Seth joined him. "Carson was the one who came up with that nickname. He loves to annoy them."

"Carson loves to annoy anyone," Noah

corrected. "Well, anyone, but Keegan that is."

Deciding they'd touched on enough deep topics for one night, Seth nodded to the center of the mat. "You ready to get started?" Noah walked in with an air of such dejection Seth was half-tempted to ask if he thought they were about to have a public execution.

Once at the center of the mat, Noah shot him a doubtful glance. "I don't know why we're even bothering. I'm never going to be big like you or Mitchell, so unless I get a lucky shot and knee the guy in the nuts, it'll be hopeless."

Seth eyed up Noah as he gave a silent agreement to the first part of his declaration. Given Noah's thin bone structure, he'd never be a powerhouse. But, then again, I always did like my guys thin and small, a naughty voice chanted in Seth's head. "Not entirely true. While you may be small, that doesn't mean you're any less dangerous if properly trained. Keegan managed to take out two Ravens without any help."

"That's only because Keegan was in his Jaguar form. I haven't been able to shift yet."

"Don't worry, you will soon enough. You're young, yet." As Seth spoke those words, he became painfully aware of the large age gap between him and Noah. When the mass Raven attack had occurred, Noah had just been an infant, whereas Seth had been in his early twenties,

probably the same age Noah was now. Twenty years is a huge difference, even in the shifter world where they aged at a much slower rate than humans. "There's some padding over there. Go put it on," he ordered.

Noah pulled a small face, his confusion clear, but he didn't say anything until he stood over the small mound of protective gear. "Are you sure? Brent never had me put this junk on."

Seth let out a loud sigh of aggravation. He was seriously thinking of banning any questions and the use of the word *Brent* for the duration of the training sessions. It would make his life so much easier.

Noah stripped off his hoodie and Seth had to bite back a laugh when he saw the t-shirt on underneath. Black in color, the front had huge white letters that proclaimed *Proven Penis Enlarger* on it. "Classy," he drawled.

"I don't believe in false advertisement either," Noah shot back with that cocky grin Seth had come to love and dread at the same time.

"Just get the stuff on." For this session, Seth had gone with pretty standard martial arts sparring gear, which included, a head protector, gloves, shin guards and groin protector. Of course, Noah had to keep yammering as he started to put it on.

"Don't you think this is a bit excessive? I'm going to be lucky if I can move, let alone try to

fight."

"Yes, it is. I'm not going to go gentle and pull back my punches."

Not for the first time, a hint of fear flashed over Noah's eyes. "Oh. How come you're not wearing anything?"

"Because I'm not worried about you being able to hurt me," Seth said bluntly.

"Well, there goes the last of my ego," Noah muttered as he picked up the groin protector. Large, it was made to cover not only his crotch, but also his hips and kidney area.

Seth waited. By now, he knew Noah enough to realize the Jaguar just wouldn't let something like this go by without a comment. Sure enough, again came that cocky smile as he held up the protector. "I don't think this is going to be big enough."

"Does every topic have to end at your cock?" Seth asked before he ground his teeth in frustration. He just needed Noah to stop talking for five frigging minutes. The trouble was Seth's dirty mind kept coming up with all kinds of interesting way to quiet Noah down. He frowned to himself as he wondered if only-sex-on-the-mind syndrome was catchy.

"What can I say? I like sex, a lot," Noah explained in an almost matter of fact tone. He didn't even bother to glance up from putting on the last of the pads as he made the shocking

statement.

An unwanted wave of jealously slammed into Seth as he thought about how many felines would just love to scratch that itch of Noah's. He bit back a growl as he told himself he had no right to feel that way since he had no intentions in ever tasting the small bundle of trouble in front of him. "I'm sure you have plenty of takers, too." As soon as the words slipped from his yap, Seth regretted them. It was a lapse in control, something that had never happened before he met Noah.

"Actually, I can't seem to find any bites." Noah shook his head sadly. "I haven't had a dry spell like this in, well...ever. Not even Trevor will fuck me anymore and we used to always hook up."

"You and Trevor are a couple?" Again with the damn jealously. Any more and Seth may as well hang up his weapons and start his own teen reality show. All that was missing was the sappy music playing in the background.

Noah gave him a *duh* look. "No, I said we hooked up. That's completely different. I don't think I've ever actually been in a real relationship with anyone."

Damn, those words were almost Seth's undoing. He knew that he could probably strip Noah and be fucking him within minutes. He actually curled his fingers as he thought about how it would feel to pin the smaller man under

him and make him submit in every way.

In the end, Seth knew he couldn't do that though for Noah had just made it painfully clear that any sex between them would be just that—sex. And from the way he talked, there probably wouldn't be any second helpings. Seth also knew that if he did have Noah, once wouldn't even begin to be enough.

CHAPTER FOUR

Noah took in a deep, cleansing breath and tried to clear his head as the cool, night air brushed over his cheeks. It didn't work though.

"Noah! You're not trying hard enough. Now relax, damn it," Cassie snapped.

Noah shifted more in his cross-legged position as he cracked one lid to give his sister a baleful look. She sat next to him, her legs twisted in a likewise pretzel position. When a strong gust of wind picked up her long hair and blew it into his face, he gave up all pretense of trying and let out an aggravated sigh.

A snarky voice called from behind them. "Yeah, you need to try hard and relax at the same time. What's so difficult about that?"

"Shut up, Carson," Cassie called back before she let out a long-suffering sigh, closing her eyes again.

Secretly, Noah shared her annoyance. Trying to

meditate was hard enough for someone as twitchy as him. Trying to mediate with Keegan and Carson sitting several feet behind him made the task impossible. But since Cassie had decided to take tonight's shifting lesson up to the rooftop, Mitchell had insisted the pair come along to help guard Noah.

Noah wiggled around, trying to get into a more comfortable position. Two weeks of training with Seth had left Noah with more than his fair share of bruises and no matter how he sat, he seemed to be putting pressure on a sensitive spot.

"Stop moving and just get lost inside yourself," Cassie advised.

He had to hold back his snort of disbelief. With all this meditation and *finding your inner peace*, he felt half-tempted to ask if this were a coalition or a hippie commune. What's more was that Cassie was the one spouting this crap. She seemed the last one to swallow this whole spiel. Just this afternoon, she punched Carson in the gut for calling her Cupcake. "Are you serious?" he drawled, earning a short burst of laughter from Carson

Cassie shot the Cheetah another disapproving glare before she returned her attention to Noah. "I know it may seem stupid, but you have to get in touch with your Jaguar. Let it know that you accept it."

"What if it's napping or something? I would hate to interrupt it," Noah couldn't resist replying.

This time Carson laughed even harder. Keegan shushed him before adding his two cents, "Just try it. I promise it gets easier the more times you do it. All felines have to learn this before their first shift."

Somehow, Noah couldn't see Mitchell or Brent sitting on their asses while they searched for their inner kitty zen. "Did you do it?"

Keegan paused uncertainly. "Well, since my shift came on too early, I only had time for one lesson before it happened. But the exercises did help some. Plus, Cassie helped me out after the fact, like she's doing for you now."

Of course, because everything came easy for Keegan. Noah fought back a surge of childish resentment because Keegan was his littermate and he had taken a huge risk in Noah's rescue mission. It wasn't easy though. Because too often he compared himself to Keegan and every time, Noah found himself lacking.

Keegan had a photographic memory. Noah on the other hand got so scattered brained, he often left the milk out. Keegan was usually kind and sweet. Noah had the tendency to bitch and he used to be a street hustler. Keegan had a super hot mate who loved him. Noah only had his right hand and even that cramped up from being used too much.

Keegan smiled brightly at him. "Why don't you try again? I know you can do it."

Because not even he was immune to Keegan's charm, Noah closed his eyes and took several deep breaths.

"Do you feel your Jaguar?" Cassie asked in a near whisper.

No, what he did feel was annoyed. He tried for several more minutes before he gave up. "It doesn't matter anyway because I don't think I'm ever going to get the hang of this." Even as he said those words, Noah realized he'd echoed the same thing he's told Seth numerous times. First fighting and now this, he didn't think he'd ever be able to fit into the feline world. "What if I never shift? Maybe they broke something in me when they beat me up so many times?"

Cassie opened her eyes so she could give him a soft stare. "That can't happen, so you can put that worry away right now. When the time comes, your body will know what to do and it'll shift on its own. I'm just showing you some exercises to teach you how to relax and not fight it so it doesn't hurt so much the first time."

"Yeah," Keegan chimed in. "The first time Jacyn shifted, he wasn't ready and he told me the pain was horrible."

A lump formed in Noah's throat as he glanced

back at his littermate. Like all the others in the family, Keegan had that same speckled hair. Without realizing it, Noah reached up and toyed with his own raven locks. Finally, he voiced his biggest fear of all, "What if you guys are wrong and I'm not related to you? What if I've been the wrong Joel all along?"

Joel had been Noah's birth name. When he'd left his last foster home, he'd changed it, both to confuse Social Services if they decided to search for him and also as a way of leaving behind some of the painful memories. Even though he now was of age and relatively safe, he still went by Noah. As far as he was concerned, Joel was some weak, scared kid and Noah never wanted to be that person again.

Cassie reached over and gently cupped his face. "I knew the second I saw you that you were ours."

"But I don't look anything like you guys," Noah's voice cracked a bit.

"Of course you do," Cassie replied fiercely. When Noah tugged at his damning hair again, she shook her head. "That doesn't mean anything."

"How can you be so sure that I'm your brother?" Noah persisted.

"Well, for one thing all the blood work they did when you first came to the infirmary proves it," Keegan supplied.

Noah pulled back, anger boiling in his stomach.

"Why didn't anyone say anything about blood tests before now?" Damn it, hadn't they realized how much he'd agonized over this? How often he'd wondered if he was an intruder. How afraid he'd been to love them for fear that they'd be ripped away from him if it came out that they weren't related?

"Fuck it," Carson snarled. "If you guys don't tell him then, I will."

Cassie dropped her hands and, for the first time since Noah had met her, he saw fear in his sister's eyes.

"Mitchell said the time wasn't right, yet."

"With all due respect, I think he's wrong," Carson argued. He glanced over at Keegan. "What about you, Cub? What do you think?"

Keegan stared at Noah for several seconds before slowly nodding his head. "Tell him."

Now fear had replaced anger. What could possibly be this bad to get all of them this worked up? "What's going on?"

They all exchanged whose-going-to-do-thetalking looks before Keegan finally shrugged and said, "Has anyone told you that there are two types of Jaguars?"

"Yeah, the regular kinds like you guys and then there's black ones, like Logan," Noah replied.

Logan was Jacyn's mate and, while he and Noah hadn't talked much, the guy seemed nice enough in a dark, brooding kind of way.

"Did you know the history behind Black Jaguars?" Keegan pressed.

"Not much. Just that they are rare and were once considered bad luck." Suddenly Noah wished he'd taken time to read all the research and history books Mitchell had given him.

"That's putting it mildly," Carson cut in. "It's only been since Mitchell's leadership that Black Jaguars were even let into the coalition. Before that, they were exiled and had to live a rogue feline life."

"Wow, that's harsh," Noah said. Then it hit him. Logan had dark hair and so did he. It could all be a coincidence, but if so, then why would they be bringing up Black Jaguars at all.

He became all too aware of the probing stares coming his way. Not wanting to make them worry more about him than they already did, he slapped on a fake smile. "Cool, I've always looked much better in black anyway."

To prove his point, he gestured down to his black t-shirt and sweat pants. Even though inside, he was falling apart, he knew that he could bluff his way into making them believe him. After living so many years on the streets, he'd perfected deceit to a near perfect art form.

While he should be elated because that last little bit of doubt had been dashed and he knew he truly belonged, Noah really wanted to puke. Just when he'd thought he finally thought found a place where he wouldn't be an odd duck, he found out that he was...pun intended...the black sheep of the family. "It's not going to be a big deal because I've decided not to ever shift." He sprang to his feet, then dusted off his ass.

"Ha. Ha," Keegan said dryly.

Noah just shrugged even though he hadn't been joking. As far as he was concerned, if he never shifted, then he'd never be exposed as a Black Jaguar. Problem solved. Besides, the whole idea of turning into an animal kind of freaked him out.

Not waiting for a response, he pushed open the door leading back inside and started down the narrow staircase. He'd just reached the bottom step when a voice stopped him.

"You're not that good of a liar."

Noah turned and saw Carson coming down the stairs. Keegan and Cassie must have decided to continue with the whole mediation crap because Carson was alone. Noah paused on the small landing at the bottom of the stairs and waited for Carson to join him. While he could have easily made an escape into the main area of headquarters, past experience told him Carson would just give chase. So Noah decided to keep up with the whole all-is-good act. "I don't know

what you're talking about."

"Do you know why they used to call me Rat?" Carson asked as he joined Noah.

Noah sighed. He was really getting sick of the do-you-know questions. "Because you couldn't hold your shift. Rats are considered the lowest of animals and the name was an insult."

"So maybe you'll believe me when I say I realize what it feels like to be different."

"It's not like that with me," Noah lied.

Carson cocked a pierced brow. Everything about the Cheetah screamed that he embraced being different. From the way he dyed his hair black to the way he lined his eyes with kohl.

"Like I said, it's cool that I'm a Black Jaguar," Noah continued to deny.

"Yeah, how stupid of me," Carson drawled in that annoying way of his. "Here I thought that after a childhood of foster homes and then being homeless on the streets, you'd be ecstatic to finally find a place where you belonged."

"Of course I am."

"Then it would stand to reason that you'd be a little freaked out to discover that maybe you didn't belong quite as much as you thought you did?"

That stung Noah so much he actually took a step backward. The fact that Carson had so quickly managed to figure out what Noah had been thinking both shocked and unsettled him. "You don't know me at all, so don't presume to decide how I'm thinking."

"Are you kidding?" Carson slowly shook his head. "I know you better than anyone here. It wasn't too long ago that I stood right where you are now. All scared of how others would react when they realized that I'm such freak of nature and since we're already at odds with nature just by being shifters, that says a lot, too."

Finally, the anger that had been building boiled over and Noah lost it. "So what? You think I can just get happy, maybe start going back to my birth name like you did and everything is going to be fine? Because it's not. You learned how to hold your shift, so now you're normal. Since I can't very well switch from a Black Jaguar to a normal one, that's not going to happen for me. I'm always going to be different. Fuck, it would have been better for Mitchell and the others if I were still in the streets selling my ass for a few bucks."

Horrified by what he'd just revealed, Noah turned away. If Cassie and his brothers hadn't known his past before, they sure as hell would now. They wouldn't be the only ones either. He'd be willing to bet, Seth would be finding out soon, too.

Damn it, why did this have to happen now? He'd just started to earn the Tiger's respect. Some of the cold gruffness had left Seth and he'd begun to treat Noah as something more than a loser. Once he learned that Noah had actually stooped so low as to fuck anyone who'd been willing to pay, all that respect would be gone.

Strong arms came up from behind Noah and pulled him into a tight embrace. At first Noah stiffened, shocked because Carson never showed affection or tenderness to anyone but Keegan. Then Noah allowed himself to relax and he sagged against Carson's chest. There was nothing sexual about the embrace. It was meant solely for comfort and Noah drank it in. "Please don't tell him," he begged as he closed his eyes.

"Who? Mitchell or Seth?" Carson asked softly.

Noah jerked in surprise.

Carson explained, "The security system logs whenever someone leaves the apartment. It was only a matter of looking into the video footage to figure out it was you."

"Are you going to tell Mitchell?" God, he felt like a kid asking his buddy not to tattle about smoking in the boy's room.

"No, I can understand needing to get away from it all once in a while. Besides, I think you're good for Seth."

Noah pulled away so he could look at Carson. Surely he had to be joking. "Don't you mean he's good for me?"

"No. Seth's been through a lot and sometimes he takes life too seriously. He needs somebody like you to remind him it's okay to have fun once in awhile."

"Like I'm a walking party." Noah gave a humorless chuckle. "Lately, I've been so depressed and mopey, I feel like the front man for an emo band."

"It's okay to be a little grouchy. You've been through a lot of shit, too. But if you keep it up too long, we're going to have to consider buying you more black clothes and nail polish."

This time his laugh was genuine. "Okay, I promise not to drag it out too long." He paused for a second. "Thanks, Carson. You know, for understanding so much."

"Hey, I'm here whenever you want to talk. Better yet, why don't you talk over some of this stuff with Seth?"

Noah opened his mouth to protest.

Carson held up a hand. "I don't mean all the gritty details. You can just stick to the basics. I still think it will do you a load of good."

Noah paused to consider that suggestion. In the past couple weeks, he and Seth had gotten much closer. While they usually just kept their conversations centered around training, Noah had grown to enjoy Seth's company and not just because the guy was sexy as hell.

"Maybe I will," he finally agreed. Perhaps if he confided some things with Seth, they could get even closer. Noah's desire for the man had only grown over time, to the point where he no longer even looked at anyone else because there wasn't a guy around who could compare to Seth.

Not only that, but Noah felt safe around Seth. So much so, that he felt as long as the warrior was with him, nobody, not even Declan, could harm him. That was something not even Mitchell or Brent had been able to offer.

Noah pushed open the door and walked into the main area of headquarters. It may be early, but he decided he'd find Seth anyhow. Maybe they could take some time and have a real talk before they got down to training. Noah licked his lips in eager anticipation. Or perhaps, he'd be able to finally convince Seth to do something more than just talk.

CHAPTER FIVE

Since he had a couple hours before Noah came down, Seth busied himself at the shooting range. It had been awhile since he'd practiced and he didn't want to get rusty. He'd learned too many times that it only took the smallest lapse in skill to get somebody killed.

He'd just finished up and had started to clean his Glock when he spotted movement from the corner of his eye. Glancing up, a jolt of shock went through him as Noah approached. He frowned as a warm feeling pooled in his stomach. Why was it that every time he saw Noah, it made him want to smile like some love sick nancy? To cover his annoyance at his reaction, Seth grunted, "You're early."

"I know. I just noticed you here and thought I'd come over and say hello." Noah grinned, all boyish and sweet.

"Aren't you afraid Mitchell or Brent will see

you out of your hamster ball?"

"They both went to some meeting with the Wolf shifter leader."

"You mean Chris?" Seth asked as he finished cleaning the gun.

"Yeah, Dean's brother. I don't think Cassie likes Chris too much, though." Noah cocked his head to the side thoughtfully. "She called him a pigheaded jerk who had a bad case of mange."

From what Seth had heard, Cassie liked Chris just fine, but he didn't voice that aloud. If she wanted to keep her little crush a secret, that was fine by him. As he stole another glance at Noah, Seth found himself sympathizing with her even more. Yeah, he could truly appreciate lusting after someone you couldn't have.

"So, since they're gone, you decided to bug me instead?" Seth smiled to take the bite out of his words. Truth be told, he'd come to love spending time with Noah. While some of his flirting and sexual innuendos could be over the top, he also possessed a sharp wit that Seth had come to admire.

"Are you going to change your hair back?" Noah asked, abruptly changing the subject.

"Why, don't you like it this way?"

Noah tapped his chin with his forefinger, as if thinking hard. "Wow, that's a hard choice. Tall, dark and brooding or hot, sexy and blond?"

Well, at least Noah had managed a few minutes without flirting. That was an improvement. Not for the first time, Seth wondered if Noah was like this with all the men and, also not for the first time, he felt a near blinding wave of jealously over that thought. "I'll probably change it back. I can't have people mixing me up with Carson," Seth teased.

Noah laughed.

Seth noticed the humor didn't reach the Jaguar's eyes. Despite Noah's carefree banter, something obviously upset him. Seth frowned to himself as he realized how much that bothered him in turn.

"People think I dye my hair," Noah said lightly, as he directed his attention to the ground.

Seth's hands stilled as the implication of those words sunk in. "You don't?"

"No. When I was around six, my hair turned this color and it's been that way ever since." Noah shrugged like it was no big deal.

Seth didn't buy it for one goddamn minute. "Let me guess? You just found out what that probably means." Fuck, why couldn't life give this kid a break just for once?

"Yeah, Carson, Cassie and Keegan told me. I guess they've known all along, but Mitchell thought it would be better if I didn't have to deal with that, yet." There was no mistaking the

bitterness in Noah's tone.

Not that Seth blamed him. While Mitchell only meant well, his smothering had gotten to the point of ridiculous. The leader had always been a little uptight and overprotective of his family. Seth had hoped that now Mitchell had taken a mate, he'd loosen up a bit, but it would appear not. "You need to talk to Mitchell. Tell him that he needs to stop treating you like a kid. You're twenty-three years old and even in the shifter world, it still makes you your own man."

Noah screwed up his face. "You're right. It's just I don't want to seem..."

Seth prompted, "What?"

"I don't want to seem ungrateful. He did rescue and take me in. It wouldn't be right for me to complain."

"He didn't take you in. He brought you to your rightful home. You belong there just as much as any of them. Lance was your father, too," Seth pointed out, referring to the old coalition leader.

"I guess." Noah sounded far from convinced, however. "Does it bother you that I'm a Black Jaguar?"

Seth had grown up on tales of how that form of shifter meant bad luck and had to be driven from the coalition, lest they all be cursed. Ever since he'd been old enough to think for himself though, Seth hadn't believed in such twisted logic. He wasn't the only one either. Under Mitchell's rule, all the old laws banning Black Jaguars had been rescinded. Hell, when Jacyn had taken on Logan as a mate, Mitchell hadn't even hesitated to welcome the man into his family—something that would have been unheard of just a few decades ago. "Nothing could change my opinion of you, brat," he told Noah in a gruff voice. Something flickered in Noah's gaze that Seth couldn't identify.

"You say that now, but you don't know everything about me."

Even though he knew it was wrong and that they had a several dozen witnesses, Seth reached out and gently cupped Noah's cheek. "I wish you could see yourself the way I do."

Noah gave a lopsided grin that somehow managed to look sad. "What? As an annoying pest who doesn't know when to shut up?"

"No, someone who is damn brave and way too good looking for their own good." Seth ran the pad of his thumb along Noah's cheekbone.

Fuck, he really should pull away. This wasn't the middle of night and there were several witnesses. Seth could feel all of their stares on them, too. But now that he had Noah's heated gaze on him and the sensation of the Jaguar's soft skin imprinted on his mind, Seth knew he couldn't deny himself. Not even when Noah tilted his head

back and moved in closer.

The first brush of Noah's lips was pleasant, the second thrilling, the third ball-numbing good. Seth cupped the back of Noah's head and gave up all semblance of control. He even moaned a bit before he thrust his tongue out to stroke the inside of Noah's mouth.

Noah made the softest sigh of passion before he began to return the kiss, his tongue darting out to meet Seth's touch. The sweet taste of the Jaguar soon proved to be addicting and Seth found himself delving in for more. The thick length of his cock pressed against his fatigues and he found himself reaching out the grab Noah's hips to bring him in closer so they could rub against each other.

The reaction from Noah was nearly immediate. He gripped Seth's arms and began to grind against his thigh.

Seth realized they were probably leaving their scents all over each other. Any other feline who came within inches of them after this would take one whiff and know what they'd been up to, but for the life of him, Seth couldn't remember why that should matter to him.

Then a voice butted in, "That's it, Seth. Teach that kitten who's boss."

That callous comment hit him like a bucket of ice water. With a low curse, he jerked back. Noah let out a disappointed sound as he lunged

forward, but Seth put a hand in the center of his chest to hold him at bay. Several whistles and catcalls cut through his lust-fogged brain. He glanced up and shame hit him as he realized they had at least a dozen feline's surrounding them as they took in the show. "I'm sorry. I should have controlled myself better," he said to Noah.

Noah gave a one-armed shrugged as he grinned at the voyeurs. "It's okay. I think it's kind of a turn-on to have people watching."

At that moment, Seth once again realized how different he and Noah were. While he had already grown up and settled into the routine of a soldier, Noah had just begun to explore life. In other words, Seth had no business even touching the younger man, let alone dry humping him in front of a roomful of gawkers. "This should have never happened," Seth rasped out. As soon as he saw the hurt flicker across Noah's sweet eyes, Seth realized that such had been the wrong thing to say.

A flush spread out over Noah's cheeks as he darted a sideways glace at the spectators. "You're right, of course. You don't want to be seen with someone like me. It'll just drag you down."

"That's not what I meant..." Seth started, but found himself talking to empty air because Noah had turned heel and walked away. Seth started to go after him, but stopped. He knew it would be better for both of them if things just ended before someone really got hurt. So, why did it feel like someone had just punched him in the gut?

"Boy, you sure handled that one well," Thomas commented sarcastically as he came over to stand by Seth.

"Don't start," Seth warned, sure that Thomas had come over to lecture him for playing around with the coalition leader's much younger brother.

"It's not every day I see you fuck up. I think I may have to mark this one on my *Facebook* status." Thomas crossed his arms over his chest, his expression unreadable.

"I know I shouldn't have let things get that far."

"That's not what I'm talking about, dumbass. What I meant is the way you shunned him in front of everybody."

Seth opened his mouth to deny it, only to realize Thomas had a very valid point. He closed his eyes with a groan. "I am such an idiot."

"Yeah, you are."

"I'll make sure I apologize to him later tonight before we start the training session. Noah's pretty easy going so I'm sure he'll get over it."

Thomas raised a brow. "I wouldn't be too sure of that. From the way I saw it, you damn near broke him just now."

* * * *

Since Mitchell had been out on a mission, Noah didn't get the chance to confront him until breakfast the next morning. As he took his place at the long table, he smiled a greeting to Ranger, Cassie, Carson and Keegan, but pretty much ignored the rest of them.

Keegan mouthed, Are you okay?

Noah gave a weak smile. Truth was, he felt far from good. Too upset and embarrassed after Seth's very public rejection, Noah had skipped out on the training session. As a result, he spent all night in his cold bed, tossing and turning as his mind worked over the previous day's events.

At first, Mitchell didn't even seem to notice Noah had sat down. He and Brent were too busy discussing some mission. After listening in for a while, Noah allowed his mind to drift. All the discussion of battle tactics and crap always had been too complicated for him to wrap his mind around.

The problem with letting his thoughts wander was they went back to how Mitchell had been keeping the whole Black Jaguar issue a secret from him. The anger continued to build until his stomach grew so tight, he couldn't stomach his cereal. "You had no fucking right!" he snarled as he threw his spoon down. He hadn't realized how loud he'd said that until all the conversation

stopped and every gaze fell on him.

"Oh, boy, here we go," Keegan muttered, but he didn't make any moves to calm Noah down.

Of course, fucking Mitchell had to stay calm, just like always. A frigging bomb could have gone off, followed by a parade of Can-can girls and juggling clowns and the guy wouldn't so much as even raise a brow in response. He just set down his own spoon and pinned Noah with a stare.

"Is there something you wish to discuss?"

"Why didn't you tell me that I'm a Black Jaguar?" Noah demanded.

"I didn't think you were ready to handle the added stress while you were still healing."

"What gives you the right to decide what I can and cannot handle?" Noah's voice had risen again.

"He's your Alpha and he's also the head of this family," Brent defended.

"Yeah, you would take his side," Noah snapped.

"Noah, why don't you calm down and we can talk about this," Cassie soothed as she tried to reach out and take his hand.

He pulled away from her touch. "They've had six months to calmly talk to me about all this shit. Instead, they decided to treat me like some coddled idiot. I'm sick of it. I managed to make it this far in life without them just fine."

He waited for someone to call him out on that one by saying that he'd been captive and near death when they'd found him, but nobody did. Mitchell just continued to stare at him with that same calm façade and that finally made Noah lose the last shred of control he had. He'd never been one for angry fits before, but damned if he didn't pick up his bowl and throw it against the wall.

Everyone jumped as the ceramic exploded, milk and cereal going everywhere.

Noah fisted both hands in his hair as he looked at the mess he'd made. "I'm so sick of everyone keeping shit from me. You didn't even have the decency to tell me that Declan has put a bounty out on me. I had to hear that from someone else."

That finally got him a reaction. Mitchell curled up his lip as he let out a low growl. "Let me guess. Seth told you."

"It should have been *you* who told me. Instead you had to make it some great big secret that poor, stupid Noah couldn't be in on," Noah shot back, eager to get Mitchell's focus off the Tiger. Not waiting for Mitchell's response, Noah stormed from the apartment. At that moment, he just wanted to be as far away from everyone as possible.

CHAPTER SIX

None of the small conference rooms as he replayed his argument with Mitchell over in his head. He knew that he owed his brother an apology. If he'd learned one thing in the months of living in a coalition, it was that you always treated your Alpha with respect. Even if he had the tendency to be annoyingly overprotective.

The one thing that worried him the most, however, was that Seth's name had been brought up. He wondered how much Mitchell knew. Did he just hear about the kissing in the gun range or did he know about Noah's nocturnal, private lessons? Whatever the matter, Noah hoped that Seth didn't get any flack over helping him out. Even if Seth had hurt him in the end, for a while there, he'd been a good friend.

Noah barely looked up when Ranger and Trevor walked into the room and locked the door behind them. Somehow, he knew that Ranger would be coming to comfort him and Noah also knew that he'd bring in reinforcements.

As always, the fact that Ranger seemed to sense when Noah needed some support brought a measure of comfort. Even though he wasn't much older than the rest of them, the Wolf had for a time served as their mentor, protector, friend and sometimes even their lover. Not that Noah had ever minded that last part. With russet-colored shaggy hair, brown eyes and a hard, athletic build, Ranger had a special rugged appeal to him.

Trevor on the other hand, was tall, but slim, with a dark shock of hair and bright green eyes. He looked more like he should be on a skateboard than in the middle of a military headquarters. Worn blue jeans hung low on his hips, revealing the top of a pair of dark blue boxer shorts. He had on a gray t-shirt, which he smoothly stripped off and tossed to the side.

Now they both had Noah's undivided attention, but he still didn't sit up. After ignoring him for so long, the least they could do is come to him. Trevor seemed happy to oblige by nearly springing onto the table and crawling over to where Noah lay. Noah noted how the male moved in a slow, sensual grace like the Panther he supposedly was, the roll of his hips coming off as both sexy and dangerous as he looked up under

his thick, dark lashes. Noah held in a breath as he watched Trevor approach. Giving a wicked smile, Trevor licked his lips as he reached forward to run a hand up Noah's leg.

"I didn't realize that you even knew I was still alive," Noah said as he swallowed hard. "After everything that happened, I just assumed you didn't want to screw me anymore."

"Fuck, no. I've missed that big cock of yours and the way you pant dirty words into my ear as you make me come," Trevor declared as he straddled Noah's hips and slid his body up until their faces were inches apart.

"Missed you, too," Noah said and he meant it—almost. As soon as he inhaled the familiar scent of Trevor, Noah's cock swelled to life. Before being captured, Noah had shared many carnal encounters with his former roommates. It had always just been casual fucks with no strings attached, but Noah had come to rely on those brief moments of closeness. He hadn't realized until then how much he truly needed them.

"So...what? You just woke up today and decided you needed your Noah fix?" he asked as he reached up to brush the back of his knuckles along Trevor's jaw. The Panther let out low purring sounds as he arched into Noah's touch. Trevor had always loved being caressed and petted. One time Noah had made him come just

from lightly stroking various areas of his body. Neither one of them had even bothered to get undressed either.

"I heard about yesterday with Seth and then your huge fight with your family this morning. I thought maybe you could use some cheering up," Trevor explained before he leaned down and started to kiss Noah. It seemed that Trevor had gotten himself too jacked up to worry about foreplay and wanted to get straight to business.

At first, Noah stiffened as his thoughts went to Seth. As crazy as it seemed, he felt like he somehow was being unfaithful. Then Noah reminded himself that Seth wanted nothing to do with him and he opened up to Trevor's caresses. "I still don't understand why you waited so long?" Noah asked between kisses.

"Quite honestly, your brothers scare the shit out of me," Trevor confessed with a grin. "Every time someone even glances at you, Mitchell or Brent starts doing that freaking growly thing. While it's kind of hot in the whole dark and dangerous way, it does have a way of keeping everyone away."

"What changed?" Noah let out a soft gasp as he felt his pants being undone.

Ranger moved closer, but didn't climb on top of the table, yet. Instead, he just leaned over it, so he could run his hands over the two felines.

"I heard about how upset you were and I didn't

want you to think you were alone," Trevor explained as he lowered Noah's zipper.

Now that rationalization, Noah could believe. While Trevor may be a huge sex monkey, he did have a deep side to him that always made him care about his friends. Noah had never met someone more loyal.

Seth is loyal.

Noah told his inner voice to shut up as he started to kiss Trevor again. Trevor let out an eager whimper as he started to grind his cock against Noah. Noah threaded his fingers through the other man's hair and plunged his tongue inside. Trevor had this smoky, warm taste to him that had always turned Noah on.

Ah, but it's not nearly as good as the wild, spicy flavor of Seth.

Somewhere along the way, Ranger ended up on the table, too, his muscular body pressed against Noah's side. Noah said a small prayer of thanks that the table was thick and sturdy or it may have collapsed under their combined weight. Trevor gave another one of his whimpers, telling Noah that the Wolf probably had continued to caress the feline's body.

A quick glance up confirmed Ranger had one hand down the back of Trevor's jeans. The rhythmic movement of his wrist let Noah know that Ranger had at least one finger fucking Trevor's ass. It was then, he noticed the small tube of lubricant inches from his head. Leave it to Ranger to come prepared. Lubricant would be all they'd need, too. Since shifters didn't have to worry about sexual diseases, due to their immunity, they didn't have to use condoms, which meant they would all be able to feel every stroke, thrust and rub.

"He was wrong to turn you away," Ranger said as he stroked the side of Noah's face. "If he only knew the way you open up like a fucking dream when getting fucked, he'd kick himself for being so stupid."

Noah tired to speak, but all that came out was a hitching breath. He tried to deny how much Seth's rejection had hurt, but he knew that his friends would see through the lie. "Who can blame him for not wanting to fuck a cheap, whore like me?"

"Didn't I tell you not to talk about yourself that way? Those days are long behind you," Ranger admonished.

"He's right. You turned your life around long before you met Mitchell or Seth," Trevor added.

"Only because you guys helped me. If Ranger hadn't found me and taken me home with him, I'd probably still be living on the streets."

Ranger gave him a small grin. "Somehow, I think you would have still made it out. Even without our help."

"Now, let us take care of you," Trevor urged before he ran his tongue down Noah's collarbone.

A shiver of delight went through him. That particular spot on his body had always been a sweet spot and Trevor damn well knew it. Then Ranger joined in, his mouth sucking on his ear and Noah knew he was a goner. Nodding his consent, Noah closed his eyes and gave over to the sensation of two sets of lips leaving behind heated paths.

Seth is a great kisser.

With a grunt of frustration, he once more forced the image of the Tiger shifter from his mind. Two sets of hands started to caress his body, each touch more urgent and demanding than the last. Ranger tugged on his shirt in a silent command and Noah shifted just enough for them to strip him. Ranger and Trevor took off their clothes, too, so they all were nude.

I wonder what Seth looks like naked?

Noah thumped the back of his head on the table in hope of knocking some sense into his thick skull. Here he had two hot guys all eager to play and all he could think of is the man who had flatly refused him. Trevor's skilled fingers circled his cock and Noah let out a hiss as both pleasure and guilt slammed into him.

"How do you want it?" Trevor asked, his eyes stormy with need.

Noah realized he could voice any demand and it would be met. One request and he could have Ranger pounding his ass while he sucked Trevor's long cock. Hell, Trevor would gladly get on his hands and knees and take a good, hard fucking from Noah. Both those scenarios had played out plenty of times in the past. The only thing missing, would be Gage in the mix.

Then, once again, Seth's cool, blue-eyed gaze sprang into Noah's mind and he just knew he couldn't. Though Seth may not care about him, the damn idiot meant too much to Noah for him to betray. That didn't mean he had to be a complete saint though. "I want to watch Ranger fuck you," he declared as he ran his fingers down Trevor's spine.

Ranger reached out and cupped Noah's chin, forcing their gazes to meet. "Just tell me it's because of Seth and not because of what that damn Raven did to you."

A small flare of hope bloomed in Noah's gut as he realized that the memories of his abuse at Declan's hands had never once hindered his enjoyment of what he'd just shared with the others. All this time, he'd worried and agonized that he'd never be able to perform again. It gave him heady relief to know he'd be okay as far as that went. "It's not because of the Raven," Noah assured. He didn't go so far as to identify Seth as

the cause though.

Ranger gave a knowing chuckle. "I hope he's worth it."

Probably not, but it hurt too much to admit it aloud. Noah slid out from under Trevor and sat in one of the many leather office chairs around the table. Slouching, he found a comfortable position, as he watched his friends fuck.

As he stroked his cock, he had to admit watching Ranger claim Trevor was a true thing of beauty. First, Ranger pinned Trevor on his stomach before he started to rim the Panther's ass. Even though Ranger was doing the pleasuring, Noah never had any doubt who controlled the situation. Going by Trevor's whimpered pleas, he didn't either.

By the time Ranger started pounding his thick cock into Trevor's ass, Noah's own dick had grown tight with arousal. Gathering some of the pre-cum at the tip, Noah quickened his strokes. Trevor had never looked better, his face a mask of passion as he let out low moans. Just when Noah thought it couldn't get more erotic, Ranger gave a snarl as he fisted Trevor's hair. Trevor let out a low grunt as his head tilted back, his thin throat exposed in a truly submissive manner.

That finally threw Noah over the edge. Screaming out Seth's name, his cock exploded as thin ropes of cum painted his stomach and chest.

He repeated Seth's name again, this time in a hoarse whisper as he milked his balls dry. Dimly, he became aware that Trevor and Ranger's cries of passion had crested as they found release, too.

As he came down, he kept his eyes closed, content to allow the tingle of a good hard orgasm settle over his body. He didn't move until he felt the velvet path of tongue licking the cum off his stomach. Cracking his lids, Noah saw Trevor had gotten up and was now on his knees in front of him. Noah moaned in an appreciative manner as he stroked Trevor's hair. It wasn't until his skin was completely clean that Trevor let out sigh and rested his cheek on Noah's knee.

"Feel better?" Trevor asked.

"Much, thanks."

Ranger got up and started to gather all the clothes up and handed them back to their appropriate owners. As they cleaned up and got dressed, several more heated kisses were exchanged. All the while, Noah wondered if the others had heard him screaming out Seth's name in the heat of passion.

A loud knock on the door made them jump apart guiltily. With a nervous chuckle to the others, Noah moved to answer it. On the way over, he picked up the tube of lubricant from the table and slipped it into his front pocket. No sense in leaving incriminating evidence out for anyone to see. He swung open the door to reveal a very, stern looking Mitchell.

Trevor let out a squeaked, "Oh, fuck."

Noah for his part, met his brother's gaze and refused to show any shame. "Sorry, I didn't know this room was scheduled to be used for a meeting."

"It's not. I came to talk to you," Mitchell replied shortly. He nodded to Ranger. "Dean is looking for you. He said if you want, the two of you can go out for a run tonight."

"Sweet!" Ranger exclaimed, showing an uncharacteristic burst of excitement.

Ever since he'd first shifted a month ago, he'd become almost addicted to going out on long runs while in his wolf form. Brent had told Noah it was something all Wolves had in common. Since they lived in Flint and the area didn't have that many trees, let alone wooded areas that were big enough to accommodate two adult male wolves, the pair had to drive thirty minutes to one of the bigger State parks. Before he took off though, he still paused long enough to dart worried looks over at Noah and Trevor.

Mitchell let out a sigh. "I won't bite them, I promise."

Ranger flushed before he nodded and motored from the room.

After he'd gone, Mitchell shook his head. "He

still feels protective over all of you since he was the Alpha of your stray pack."

Noah had never thought of it that way before, but it did kind of make sense. When they had all banded together and lived in that rundown apartment, they did form a pack of sorts. Ranger had always taken on the responsibilities to make sure they had food and clothing, too.

Trevor started to shift from one foot to the other. While it was clear he wanted to run, Mitchell blocked the only exit. Finally, Mitchell let out another sigh. "You can go, too. Dumb and Ass were looking for you, anyway."

Noah had to bite back a laugh of surprise because Mitchell had used the Panthers's nickname. Maybe it was a good sign that his brother wasn't too pissed.

"Thank God," Trevor breathed and he practically broke out into run.

Just as he reached the door, Mitchell stopped him by putting a hand on his arm. "You may want to avoid Seth though. Right now you reek of Noah and I don't think he'll appreciate that."

Trevor's eyes grew wide with fear. "You don't think he'd get jealous, do you?"

"I don't think, I know."

"Seth has no say in who I decide to spend my time with," Noah cut in angrily.

"Maybe not, but I still have a feeling he won't

react too well if he smells your scent on another male. So, in the interest of keeping Trevor in one piece, I think it's just better if I keep the two of them apart. I've been told Trevor shows great promise in his military training and I would hate to lose a good soldier before he even goes on his first mission."

Trevor's eyes grew bigger, but this time it came from the unexpected praise. "Wow, thanks. I'll make sure to stay away from the Tiger for awhile."

After Trevor left, Mitchell pushed his way in and shut the door. "We need to talk."

"If this is about my hissy fit, let me start by apologizing. I shouldn't have gone all drama queen with my *Fruit Loops*." Noah took a seat and waited for the balling out he knew he fully deserved.

Mitchell gave a dismissive wave. "That's no big deal. You should see the damage Brent does when he get pissed. It's in our nature to get a little aggressive from time to time."

"Even so, I'll make sure to clean it up when I get back."

"I already did it, so don't worry. I needed something to do while the rest of the family chewed me another one." Mitchell sat heavily in the chair next to him.

Noah blinked in surprise. "They yelled at you?

Why?"

"For the way I've been treating you. Seems like you weren't the only one who thought I was going a little overboard with the protectiveness. Even Dean let me have it."

The last thing he'd expected was for everyone to come to his defense. "Maybe I should have stuck around for a little longer. That must have been interesting to see."

"They were right, too. I've been way too hard on you." Mitchell let out a deep breath. "I keep making that same, damn mistake, too. I did it first with Jacyn, then Keegan and now you. You'd think I'd fucking learn."

"I'm sure you meant well." Even while still angry, he hated to see Mitchell beat himself up that way.

"I try not to, but then I think back to the night Mom and Dad died and how I failed to protect you then and then I start to worry that I'll somehow let you down again. I thought that I'd finally gotten a hold of it after Keegan came home, but then when you almost died I started getting that same helpless feeling again."

Noah bit back a shocked gasped. He hadn't been this stunned since the time he caught Brent reading *War and Peace*. The mere fact that someone as powerful as Mitchell actually felt helpless was something that Noah had never stopped to

consider. He took a deep breath before saying, "I never blamed you for everything I went through. You didn't make that guy abuse me as a kid, nor did you force me to sell myself to a bunch of strangers, any more than you allowed Declan to do all those things to me. If anything, you're my hero."

Mitchell glanced away, but not before Noah detected a hint of tears in the leader's eyes. "Thanks, that means a lot to me."

"Just one thing."

"Anything."

"Can you lay off, just a bit? I would like to be able to go out for a burger without having to take an armed guard with me." Noah smiled to take some of the bite out of his sentence.

"On one condition. I want you to start going to the shooting range so you can learn how to handle a gun. If I know that you're carrying a weapon on you, I'll feel better about letting you leave headquarters," Mitchell said.

"What if I turn out to be a bad shot like Keegan?"

Keegan had such a notorious rep for his lack of gun control that whenever he showed his face at the shooting range, everyone ran in the opposite direction.

Mitchell gave him an are-you-kidding look. "I could get a blind cow from a pasture, slap a gun in

its hoof and it would still be a better shot than Keegan."

"A Cow shifter or a real cow?" Noah got the look again.

"A real one. There's no such thing as Cow shifters. If you'd had bothered to read even one of the books I gave you, you would have known that."

Noah winced. "Sorry."

"That does bring me to the other reason I'm here. Dean thought it was time for you to take on a job for the coalition."

That cheered Noah right up. "I would love to. I'm getting sick of just hanging out and playing Wii all day. What do you have in mind?"

"Well, you're not the only new shifter coming in with no clue of what our history is. So Dean thought it would be a good idea if we established a research library for all the lost shifters to use when they come home. We would need you to set up the room and catalogue all the books."

The hope inside Noah did a crash dive to be quickly followed by shame. "You do realize I only have an eighth-grade education?"

"Ranger assured us that you were the smartest one in your stray pack. Plus, I've noticed how bright you are, too. If I didn't think you could handle the job, I would have never offered it to you." Noah tugged nervously at his hair. "I guess I could give it a try."

"One other thing, try to cut Seth some slack."

His mouth dropped open in shock. "There must be something wrong with my hearing because you did not just ask me to go easy on that jerk."

Mitchell moved forward in his seat. "The night of the Raven attack was bad on all of us, but none more so than Seth."

Something in Mitchell's gaze made the anger leave Noah. Mouth suddenly dry, he asked, "What happened?"

"When they came, the first thing they did was take out his father. They weren't quick about it either. They made the whole family watch while the man was literally ripped apart, limb-by-limb. Then when they got done with that, they started in on his mother. He had to stand by, helpless while they raped and then murdered her, too."

Noah took in a shaky breath as he imagined the horror Seth had endured.

Mitchell continued, "Next, the Ravens shot Seth in the head, then left him for dead. When he came to, not only did he find that they'd destroyed and looted his home, but his younger brother was missing. He's been looking for Owen ever since."

"Kind of like you were looking for me," Noah replied in a small voice.

"And how I'm still searching for Andy. The

family won't be complete until we have him home."

"I can see that now," Noah nodded in agreement. "So, you say Seth has always been looking for Owen. Didn't he just assume he'd died along with everyone else?"

"No, both he and I never believed all the kids had been killed. It just wasn't until recently that we had proof that the lost shifters were still alive. Now that we have the list from the Hawks, we finally know just who did survive that night."

"Not to sound callous, but what does this have to do with the way Seth treated me?" Noah let out a small sound of distress. "Unless he can't stand to touch a Raven's sloppy seconds."

Mitchell reached over and pulled Noah into a sloppy hug. "That's not it at all."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Well, for one thing, I know for a fact that he waited around the training facility for over two hours last night when you stood him up."

"Really?" A strange fluttering sensation went through Noah's stomach.

"Not only that, but he just opted out of a new mission, something he's never done before."

"So, what does that have to do with me?"

"This mission would have taken him away for a month or longer."

A burst of panic hit Noah as he thought about

not seeing Seth for that long. "You're not going to force him to go are you?"

"I wouldn't do that to you or him."

"Thanks." Noah swallowed nervously. "So why do you think he pushed me away?"

"Because he's afraid of losing someone he loves again. By caring for you, he's opening himself up for hurt and he knows that."

Noah shook his head at the hopelessness of it all. "How do I change his mind about that?"

"Well, the first thing you can do is make sure you don't stand him up again tonight."

Noah mulled that over until a horrifying thought occurred to him. "But you said my scent was all over Trevor. Wouldn't the reverse be true?"

"Oh yeah, you just reek of Trevor."

"Won't that piss Seth off?"

Mitchell gave a wicked grin. "I'm counting on it."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Seth jerked open the door to headquarters and vowed to himself that no matter what, he and Noah would finally have it out tonight. He didn't care if he had to track the brat all the way down to his bedroom. Hell, he'd handcuff Noah to his own damn bed if that's what it took for him to listen.

He was so intent on getting to the training facility, he almost didn't hear someone calling his name. With a huff of exasperation, he turned around and saw Carson leaning out of the door of the pit he called an office.

"I'm kind of busy now," Seth said, not bothering to hide his annoyance.

As usual, that did nothing to deter the Cheetah. He just gestured for Seth to come over. "It'll just take a second. I promise you're going to want to see this."

Seth highly doubted that. The last time Carson had spoke those words to him, Seth had found himself watching a online video that involved two ladies, one cup and a hell of a lot of disgusting. The worst part was that Carson had secretly recorded Seth's reaction, then forwarded it to every member of the coalition. That had been over a year ago and Seth still hadn't forgiven the jackass for it. "I think I'll pass this time, thanks," Seth drawled before he turned around and started to walk away.

He made it exactly two steps before Carson's next sentence stopped him dead in his tracks. "This video has Noah in it."

Even though he knew better, that piqued Seth's attention. He clenched his hands into fists while he argued with himself that one could never trust Carson with this kind of thing.

"Come on. You know you want to see it," Carson sang in an all-too-knowing voice.

"Damn him," Seth cursed under his breath before he turned heel and want over to the office. At the door, he paused long enough to give Carson a glare, "If this video is anything like the last one, I'm going to stake you out in the yard for the Rayens to find."

"Trust me. You're going to love it," Carson promised as he gestured to an empty chair.

Not surprisingly, Keegan was there, curled up on the couch, reading a book that looked bigger than he was. He glanced up with a huge grin. "So you're the reason Noah went all postal with his breakfast food this morning."

"Huh?" Seth frowned.

"Seriously, Mitchell and I spent most of the day digging cereal out of the dry wall. Not only that, Noah broke one of the *Kellogs* characters collectable bowls and now we don't have a complete set anymore."

"That's the saddest thing out of all this," Carson agreed as he took a seat in front of the computer and started tapping on the keyboard.

"The drywall or the bowl?" Seth asked, feeling as if he had all of the sudden been sucked into some game where he had no control of the rules.

Carson made a big show of rolling his eyes. "The bowl of course. Walls you can fix, but once you break up a collection, there's no getting it back."

"Are you ever going to get around to showing me the damn video or did you just drag me in here to drive me insane with this conversation?"

"You know, you really need to learn to relax some." Carson sighed as if overly sad. "I don't know what Noah sees in you."

"There's nothing going on between me and Noah so you can save it," Seth snapped. Pain sliced through his chest at that declaration. The past twenty-four hours had been hell to go through. Seth had found he missed the young

Jaguar more than he could have ever imagined. Not just the sight of his tight body and sweet ass either. Seth also missed Noah's impish grins, his laugh and even his outlandish flirting.

"Did you ever wonder how Declan and the pack of Wolves he aligned with found Noah and the others?" Carson asked, abruptly changing the subject.

"I just figure the bird got lucky and stumbled over them."

"Nah, Declan's too stupid for that," Keegan scoffed.

"Cub is right. The only reason he knew about Noah and his buddies was because they were naïve enough to announce their presence to the world." Carson clicked a few more keys and a video popped up on the monitor.

"This just looks like a YouTube video and not even a high quality one," Seth remarked as he squinted at the screen. The picture quality looked almost as tacky as the cheap, red sheet that someone had pinned to the wall to use as a backdrop.

"Just wait for it," Carson advised with a wink.

Music started playing and Seth wrinkled his nose. "Isn't that *Tik Tok* by Ke\$ha?"

"Don't be so quick to judge. I have a feeling this is about to become your favorite song." Keegan laughed.

Seth sighed as he returned his attention the monitor just in time to see Noah come onto the screen. He appeared to be younger and a bit thinner, but there was no mistaking that cocky grin and sexy swagger. He wore tight black jeans and an even tighter top as he began to sing, his hips gyrating in the sexiest of dances.

"Doesn't he have a great voice?" Keegan smiled proudly.

"Uh," Seth grunted, too dumbstruck by raw lust to form words. The way Noah moved should have been illegal. Hell, it probably was in most states, especially when two of his former roommates joined in with the dancing. Gage, the Hawk even went so far as to put his hand up Noah's top.

"Sweetie, I don't think it's the singing that has Seth impressed," Carson quipped.

Carson had a point. While Noah did have the sweetest voice, that wasn't what had Seth rock hard and nearly panting with desire. Then he watched as Gage slid his hand down Noah's tootight-for-his-own-good pants and Seth snapped. Letting out a feral snarl, he shot to his feet.

Keegan called out something, but Seth didn't even acknowledge it. His mind focused on one thing and one thing only—finding Noah, pinning him down and fucking him into submission.

He found Noah alone in the training room. He must have made a noise as he walked in because Noah turned around, his mouth parted slightly in surprise.

Mine! The single words snapped inside Seth's head the same moment he detected it...the unmistakable scent of another male on his soon to be mate. A red-hot rage hit Seth in the chest as the word fired through is lust-hazed mind once more. Mine! Letting out a snarl, he launched himself at Noah.

* * * *

One moment, Noah was getting ready to call out a greeting and the next he found himself flat on his back with over two-hundred pounds of angry Seth on top of him. He let out a gasp of shock as his body slammed into the mat. Shocked and more than a little turned on, he instantly wrapped his arm around Seth to hold him closer.

Seth gazed down, his blue eyes alive with a feral possessiveness that should have terrified Noah. It didn't though. Instead, it sent a heady thrill spiraling through his body. "I see you changed your hair back to blond," he observed in the same tone he would have used if they had been sitting down at a fancy restaurant instead of wrapped around each other on a cold mat.

Seth leaned in until his lips were inches from Noah's ear. "Why do you have the smell of another man on you?"

A head-to-toe shiver of passion danced down Noah at those words. "I didn't know that you'd care."

A low, animalistic growl was his response. "I'm going to rip him apart for touching you."

"You will do no such thing." Noah gave Seth a light slap on the back. "Besides it's not like anything really happened. I couldn't go through with it."

A wicked grin slowly spread out over Seth's face, making him look even more dangerous. "Why?"

Noah took in a deep breath, drinking in Seth's wild scent. How he would love for Seth to cover him in that smell. He still hesitated to admit the truth to Seth, however. After being rejected already once, he didn't relish a repeat. Then he recalled Mitchell's advice and decided to plunge ahead, "I couldn't do it because it wasn't you."

Seth moved in and Noah thought he'd come in for a kiss, but at the last second the Tiger turned his head. With a low rumble, he started to nuzzle first one side of Noah's throat before moving to the other.

"What are you doing?" Noah demanded although he already had a pretty good inkling.

"I'm making sure everybody knows that you're fucking off limits." Seth ground his thick, hard cock into Noah. Even through the layers of their clothes, the friction made Noah let out a sharp cry of bliss.

"If that's the case, then why did you push me away yesterday?" Even as Noah demanded that answer, his cock jerked as if to say, shut up, dummy and just go with it.

"Because I was a damn idiot." This time when Seth made a rubbing pass, he ended it with a none-too-gentle love bite to Noah's flesh.

Noah jerked as pleasure mixed with pain. "Yes, you were."

Seth pulled back abruptly.

For one heart breaking moment, Noah thought he was going to break things off again. Then Seth put those worries to rest when he reached between them and gave Noah's dick a generous squeeze. Noah gazed up at the tall man over him. With his near, white blond hair and icy blue eyes, he should have made for an imposing figure, but instead, his strength gave Noah a semblance of peace.

At that moment, Noah realized that somehow in the past couple of weeks he'd fallen in love with Seth. That he probably had cared for him from the instant Seth had kicked down the door to his cell. Overcome with emotion, he reached up and cupped Seth's cheek. "Make love to me."

Noah had begged plenty of times to be fucked or screwed, but until then he'd never asked another to make love to him. Just the mere request left him open and raw in a way he'd never dared allow before.

His heart hammered with fear as he waited for Seth's answer. Finally, the Tiger grabbed Noah's hand and placed a soft kiss on his palm. "You have two seconds to get your clothes off before I rip them from you."

"You mean right here?" While they had never been interrupted when they were in the training room this late before, that didn't guarantee someone couldn't come in at any time.

"I thought you were the adventurous type." Seth slid over until he was on his knees beside Noah, then started to strip off his shirt.

Noah's mouth watered as Seth bared his tan, muscular expanse chest for view.

Seth tossed his shirt to the side, before he cocked a brow. "You're still dressed."

"Sorry," Noah sat up and started to fumble out of his clothes. Okay, he could do public screwing so long as he got Seth's cock inside him.

Once they were both naked, Noah didn't even have a chance to truly check out Seth before the Tiger had him pinned once more to the mat. This time when Seth dipped his head down, it was to give Noah a gentle kiss though.

"I can still smell him on you," Seth declared in a rough voice.

"It won't happen again, I promise," Noah assured him, hating the thought that he'd hurt Seth.

"It'll be better once I cover it with my scent," Seth replied.

Then Seth proceeded to do just that. First, he worked his way down Noah's chest, alternating between smooth caresses and bites before moving on to the rest of his body. Noah writhed under his touch, the pleasure soon making him babble and plead like some kind of dork. The pressure in his cock grew to a dull ache. He would have relieved it himself, but every time he reached up to stroke himself, Seth would bat his hands away.

Damn, Seth had to be thorough with the whole covering thing, too. He even sucked the back of Noah's knees before moving onto his ankles. Noah started to spread his legs wider to give Seth better access before he remembered the tube of lubricant he'd stuffed in his pocket earlier. Realizing they'd be needing it, he reached for his pants. They were just beyond his grasp and he stretched further, wiggling his fingers.

"What are you doing?" Seth's slightly amused voice cut in.

Noah looked down guiltily. "I have some lube

in my pocket."

That earned him one of those patented Seth one-brow-cocked looks. "Do you always run around with lubricant at the ready?"

Noah gave him what he hoped was a cocky grin in return. "I was saving it for when I jack off tonight, but I guess I can share it now."

"Brat." Seth gave him a firm love bite on the inside of his thigh. "Hurry up and grab it, then hand it to me."

"Are you always this bossy?" Noah demanded as he snagged his jeans, then slid the tube from the front pocket.

"Pretty much," Seth replied bluntly as he took the lubricant. He popped open the cap and squirted a good amount on his fingers, before he turned a heated look at Noah. "Damn, I can't wait to get inside you."

In response, Noah hooked his hands under his knees and pulled his legs up, opening himself to his lover.

Seth growled in approval as he ran a palm up the curve of Noah's ass. "You are so fucking beautiful."

Noah shook his head. "No, I'm not. I have too many scars."

"They only add to your appeal," Seth argued as he continued to run his hand along Noah's ass.

When one finger delved into his crack to circle

his hole, Noah closed his eyes with a soft whimper. Fully expecting to feel the cool press of a lubricated finger, he jerked in surprise when he felt a warm, velvet touch instead. "Oh God, you're tonguing me, aren't you?"

"You sure do catch on quick," Seth teased before he speared his tongue inside Noah's hole. "Fuck, baby, you're so tight. Just like a dream."

This time when Seth thrust his tongue in, he added a finger. Noah took in a sharp breath at the added intrusion, a burning sensation settling into his ass. "Not to sound ungrateful, but if you don't hurry up and fuck me, I'm going to come too soon."

Seth gave him one last lick before he straightened. "Fine, but next time I'm going to take my time and really explore your sweet body."

Noah gaped. If the whole body rubdown Seth had just given him had been rushed, then Noah could only imagine how that promised next time would be. "I don't know if I could survive that," he declared, only half-kidding.

"You'll do just fine because I'll be taking care of you," Seth promised as he used the leftover lube on his fingers to slick his own erection.

A whimper tore from Noah's throat as he eyed up Seth's cock. Long, thick and already leaking pre-cum, it had to be the biggest he'd ever seen. He sure as hell hadn't taken anything that large up

the ass before. Some of his fear must have shown on his face because Seth paused and ran a comforting hand over Noah's leg. "It'll be okay, baby. You're going to be able to take me and you want to know why?"

"Why?" Noah croaked around a suddenly dry throat.

"Because we were made for each other."

Unwanted moisture prickled Noah's eyes. That hadn't exactly been a declaration of love, but it was close enough for now. Nodding, he let out a slow breath. "Do it, Seth. Fuck me."

Seth poised the tip of his cock at the tight entrance of Noah's ass, but didn't press forward yet. "Before we do this, you should know something."

Noah nearly screamed in frustration. *Seth wants to talk now? Just when things were about to get good?* "Please, I need you."

"This isn't going to be a onetime buddy fuck thing. After I claim you, I don't ever want to catch another man's scent on you again. You belong to me and me alone."

Noah nodded eagerly. "Just you. Got it."He took another deep breath and waited, but Seth wasn't finished. He grabbed Noah's chin and forced him to lock gazes.

"I mean it, Noah. You're mine after this—forever. Are you ready for that kind of

commitment?"

"God, Seth, yes. Don't you know how much I love you?" As soon as he spoke those words, Noah felt as if a heavy weight had been lifted from his chest.

Seth gazed down at him, those normally cool eyes, warm with emotion. "No, I didn't know, but it's damn good to hear."

Noah opened his mouth to demand Seth reply in kind, but only a loud cry came out as Seth finally thrust fully inside. A burst of pain exploded, but the wonderful sensation of Seth filling him, soon followed.

"Perfect," Seth moaned as his lids fluttered closed. "Just like I knew you would feel."

Seth then started to set a hard, almost brutal pace as he pounded into Noah. Not that Noah complained. He knew that this moment was just what Seth had said it would be—a claiming. Noah had no problem with submitting either. Especially when Seth reached between them so he could stroke Noah's cock in time with his thrusts.

His balls grew tight and Noah knew he wouldn't last much longer. "Going to come."

"Do it, baby, just make sure you scream my name so everyone knows who you belong to now."

Noah did just that. Arching his back, he allowed his body to give in to the intense orgasm

slamming through him. At the same time, he yelled Seth's name so loud it hurt his throat. He'd be shocked if somebody didn't come running in to make sure everything was okay, even given the late hour.

A few thrusts later, Seth let out a growl before his cock pulsated inside Noah. He could feel wave after wave of hot come splashing inside him as Seth came. Giving one last jerk, Seth muttered something that sounded suspiciously like *mine*. Not minding the declaration of ownership in the least, Noah reached up to stroke Seth's chest. Seth let out a satisfied moan before he leaned down to kiss Noah. It was a brief touching of lips.

Seth shifted to whisper in Noah's ear, "I love you, too."

CHAPTER EIGHT

After Seth had enjoyed Noah's body yet another time, he led the younger man to the locker room so they could share a shower together. Even though they didn't have sex, they did take their time, running soapy hands over each other's bodies.

As they were toweling off, Seth asked, "Are you going back to get some sleep?" He hoped that Noah said no. While he knew the Jaguar probably could use some rest, Seth was loath to separate from him. Even now, as he watched Noah towel off his sleek body, Seth had to restrain himself for reaching out for the man.

"I'm kind of too jacked up to sleep right now," Noah said as he pulled his clothes back on.

Seth noted they were wrinkled in a way that just screamed I-had-sex-last-night kind of way. "I know of a way you can burn off some of that energy," Seth offered.

Noah gave an impish grin. "Do you now? I'll admit, it's always been a fantasy of mine to do it in a locker room."

"Not that way, perv," Seth teased, although the thought of fucking Noah in the middle of the communal showers did sound damn tempting. "I was thinking more along the lines of taking you to the gun range and giving you some lessons." The marked disappointment on Noah's face was so damn cute, Seth almost laughed.

"Oh, I guess we could do that. Mitchell mentioned he did want me to learn how to handle a gun," Noah admitted with great reluctance.

Seth stepped in close so they could share a quick kiss. "How about if I promise you a really good reward for a job well done."

Noah let out a happy humming sound. "I think I could be persuaded then."

There was a long silence as they put on their shoes. Going by the way Noah's brow furrowed though, Seth knew his Jaguar had something on his mind. He was ready to demand Noah just come out with it.

His mate blurted, "There's something you should know about me. It has to do with some things I did when I was living on the streets."

Seth rushed over so he could cup Noah's cheeks. "That's okay, baby. I already know and it doesn't matter to me."

Tears built up in Noah's eyes. "How did you find out?"

Seth's heart broke at the shame and fear lacing Noah's voice. "Nobody said anything. I just figured it out on my own."

"Aren't you disgusted with me?"

"Noah, there is nothing that can ever change the way I feel about you. I love you just the way you are. You believe me, right?"

After a few seconds, a ghost of a smile spread over Noah's face as he nodded. "Yeah, I do."

Seth grabbed his hand and led the way to the gun range. It was now technically morning, but Seth knew they probably had an hour or so before everyone started arriving for the day. Therefore, they had the place to themselves as he found the weapons and took Noah to one of the targets.

As soon as Noah saw the picture on it, he burst out laughing. "Is that in the shape of a bird?"

"Yeah, since that's the form our main enemy takes half the time, it makes sense." He handed Noah a pair of amber-tinted goggles and a set of protective ear gear.

As the lesson progressed, Seth was both shocked and pleased to find that Noah caught on quick. "Are you sure you've never done this before?" he asked after Noah had unloaded another clip.

"This is my first time, I swear." Noah grinned,

obviously pleased with himself. "It's cool to know that I don't suck at everything."

"You do just fine at the other stuff, too. Don't sell yourself short."

Noah snorted. "Please, we both know I'm never going to be a soldier like you or my brothers."

"Maybe not," Seth conceded, "but you still have a lot to offer the coalition. Not only that, but you have a great singing voice."

Noah jerked in surprise. "How do you know that?"

Seth grinned, loving, that for once, Noah was the one who was on the wrong end of a ribbing. "Keegan was right, I think *Tik Tok* is my new favorite song."

A flush spread out over Noah's face as he groaned. "I'm going to kill them for showing you that."

Seth came up behind Noah and started to nuzzle his neck. "I liked it." He could feel a tremble go through Noah's body.

"You did?"

"Yes, you were sexy as hell in it." He started to alternate kisses and little love bites, loving how it brought out the most delightful of noises from Noah.

"It was stupid of us to put it up on *YouTube* though," Noah pointed out as he tipped his head to the side.

"I'll give you that one. It did lead to your capture. I've been wondering one thing though. Why don't you sing anymore?"

Noah stilled. "Until now, I didn't think I had any right to be happy enough to do so."

That statement broke Seth's heart a bit more. "Put the gun down on the shelf," he ordered, softy.

"Why?"

"Because I'm about ready to jerk you off and I don't want you to accidently shoot me if you get too excited."

Noah took in a shuddering breath. "Fuck."

"We could do that again, but I don't think we have time before this place starts filling up." He reached down and cupped Noah through his pants before issuing his next command. "Now. Put. The. Damn. Gun. Down."

Seth chuckled as Noah fumbled to obey.

Once the gun was safely on the ledge of one of the waist-high walls surrounding them, Noah asked, "Who knew that Mr. Cool, Calm and Military had a bit of an exhibitionist in him?"

Noah did have a point. Somebody could come rolling in at any time. Hell, they were lucky they hadn't been discovered last night *getting down and nasty* on the mats. However, to his shock, Seth discovered that he enjoyed the little thrill that went with the danger of being caught.

He started sucking on Noah's neck and then reached around carefully to pop the top button of his pants. "While you look as hot as hell in jeans, I think I may make it a standing order that you only wear sweatpants from now on. That way I can get to your cock easier."

A low moan rumbled in Noah's chest as he rolled his head back against Seth's shoulder. Seth finally got Noah's pants undone and lowered the zipper just enough to free his lover's cock. Noah let out a long wail as Seth started slowly to stroke his length.

"Love you," Noah breathed as he arched his body oh so perfectly into Seth's touch. He flung one arm behind Seth's neck, making the visual even better. If someone did come in, even with the wall blocking their lower halves, there would be no mistaking what they were doing.

"Say it again," Seth snarled as he circled his thumb over the most tip of Noah's cock.

"I love you, so damn much. I have since the first second I saw you." Noah continued to do that babbling thing of his as he thrust his hips into Seth's hand. "When you picked me up and carried me out of that cell, I knew I belonged to you."

"I knew, too," Seth confessed as he picked up the pace. "That's why I went on that six month long mission. I thought if I went away, I could forget about you and how right it felt to hold you. Damn you though. Every single day I was gone, you somehow managed to invade my every waking thought. My sweet little Noah, with his big soft, fuck me eyes."

Noah let out a loud cry as he came, hot cum shooting from his cock and covering Seth's hand. "That's it, baby, give it all to me."

"Seth," Noah moaned as his body jerked against Seth's chest.

While he milked Noah dry, the Jaguar sagged against him for second while he caught his breath. "I don't suppose I could convince you to go back to my room and spend the day in bed with me?"

Seth brought his cum-soaked fingers up to his mouth and slowly licked them clean. "I would love to, but I actually have to get some work done today or both Brent and Mitchell are going to be on my ass."

"They better not. That ass belongs to me now," Noah teased as he turned around and cupped Seth's butt.

"We should probably get the guns cleaned and put them back up," Seth suggested.

"Let me do one thing first." Noah dropped to his knees and started to fumble with the zipper of Seth's fatigues. "I've been wanting to suck this cock for months now and damned if I'm going to wait any longer."

Once he had Seth's pants unzipped, he gazed

up through the lenses of his amber-colored safety goggles. Even with the tint, Seth could see the pleading in the other man's gaze. When Seth didn't say anything, Noah must have taken it as an approval because he bent forward and sucked in the length of Seth's cock.

"I guess we have a couple more minutes to spare," Seth demurred as he threaded his fingers through Noah's thick hair.

Fuck, Noah's mouth was a miracle come to life. He used first his tongue and then hard sucks to bring Seth quickly to the edge. Even though he had plenty of blowjobs before, none of them could even compare to the treatment Noah gave him. Before he knew it, Seth came. Instead of pulling back, Noah sucked him in deeper. Almost as if he were eager to get every drop of Seth's cum.

"Hey! You're here early."

Seth jumped as a new voice cut into his sexfilled thoughts. Turning, he saw Thomas coming in. There was a muffled sound from Noah and Seth glanced down just in time to see the Jaguar cover his mouth with one hand, no doubt to stifle a burst of nervous laughter.

"Yeah, I have a lot to get done today." Seth cringed as he noticed his voice trembled just a bit. Trying to be as discrete as possible, he pulled his pants back up and buttoned them.

Thomas paused, a look of confusion marring

his face. "Are you okay? You sound a little worked up over something."

There was another muffled sound from Noah. Seth risked darting another glance down. Noah mouthed *Oops* while he shrugged his shoulders. By the time he looked back up, Seth was chagrined to see that Thomas had moved closer and was now leaning on the other side of the wall.

Giving Seth a knowing smirk, Thomas sang out, "Good morning to you, too, Noah."

Seth froze as he wondered how Noah would handle this. Would he be mad? Upset? Embarrassed?

Once again, he found he'd underestimated his lover. Noah sprang to his feet, gave his mouth an exaggerated wipe and made a big show of zipping his jeans back up before he rubbed against Seth's body in a way that could only be described as sexual.

"Morning, Thomas," Noah replied cheerfully. He then gave Seth a hot, carnal, open-mouthed kiss. "If you two will excuse me, I'm going to get some coffee to go with the cream I just drank."

Seth and Thomas both stood there like a pair of idiot statues as they watched Noah saunter out. Once the Jaguar had left, Thomas let out a low whistle. "What did I tell you? That boy is trouble."

"Yeah, and I love every fucking minute of it," Seth replied with a grin.

* * * *

A week later found Noah standing at the opening to the woods of a State Park as he fought hard to control his trembling. Not from cold, since the night felt perfectly comfortable, weather wise. No, it was ball-numbing fear that had him shaking in his *Dr. Seuss Converse*.

"It will be okay. I'll stay with you the entire time," Seth promised as he came up and took Noah's hand.

Cassie, Logan, Jacyn, Mitchell and Brent walked over and joined them. While Ranger and Dean had come along on this field trip, too, they'd already shifted and taken off. Once in a while, Noah would hear one of them let out a long howl.

"You're ready for this," Cassie assured him.

"How can you be so sure?" Noah nervously licked at the sweat that had beaded on his upper lip.

"Because I'm your big sister and it's my job to know these kinds of things," she replied with a confidence Noah was nowhere near to sharing.

"It wouldn't matter if you're ready or not. I can sense you're body is getting ready to shift," Mitchell added ominously.

Noah couldn't argue with that. Over the past couple of days, he'd felt twitchy and on edge. So much so, that he'd broken yet another of their collectable bowls this morning. Although Carson was partly to blame since Noah had tossed the bowl in his direction to shut him up. Hey, it served the snarky Cheetah right for calling Noah a drama queen. "What if I get stuck halfway in between or something?"

"Relax, that hardly every happens," Brent said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"Hardly?" Noah echoed as fear clawed at his chest.

"Really not helping," Seth said as he shot Brent a glare.

"Oh God, I'm going to end up a Noah-guar and I just know I'll get only the worst parts from both my bodies." Noah started to hyperventilate and he knew he truly was coming off as drama queen right then, but couldn't help himself.

Seth grabbed Noah by the back of the neck and brought him closer until their foreheads were resting together. "You can do this, baby. You just need to relax and breathe like Cassie taught you."

"I never could get the hang of that. I couldn't even get in touch with my Jaguar."

"You don't have to," Seth soothed. "Instead, I want you to focus on me, my breathing, my scent. Since your Jaguar is being so damn stubborn, we'll just have to use my Tiger to bring him out."

"This is never going to work," Noah rasped.

"Sure it is. We're soul mates all the way through and our animal sides will feel the connection, too." Seth took Noah's hand and placed it on his chest. "Feel my heart and know it beats only for you."

If the situation had been any less serious, Noah may have felt stunned that the normally solid and serious Seth was talking all sappy like this. In his panic though, it strangely soothed Noah. He allowed his lids to drift shut.

"That's it," Seth cooed. "Now match your breaths to mine."

Noah obeyed and soon they were taking in deep, peace-inducing drags of night air. All the while, he allowed himself to get lost in the sensation of Seth's heart thumping under his palm.

You're doing so good.

It took Noah a moment to realize that Seth had used the telepathic link that all shifters shared but rarely used. Cassie had told Noah that it only worked for short distances and they normally reserved it for when they were in their animal forms.

Then he felt something shift inside of him. It was almost as if a part of him had awoken and had started to slowly stretch and yawn. His breath hitched as he realized it was his Jaguar. A spike of fear went through him until Seth's voice filled his

head again.

It's all right. He's supposed to do that.

So Noah did something he never imagined he'd be able to, he completely and totally gave over to the Jaguar. A bright light surrounded him right before a pleasant buzzing traveled throughout his body.

After a second, the light faded and Noah realized everything around him had changed. The smell of the woods became more pungent and he could detect the mixed scents of the various wildlife running throughout. The darkness didn't seem so imposing anymore either as he could now make out every tree and rock for hundreds of yards. His hearing had grown keener, too. So much so that he could hear the footfalls of Ranger and Dean, who he knew were probably miles away from them by now.

It wasn't until a huge Tiger lumbered up to him and playfully head-butted him on the flank that Noah truly realized what had occurred. He'd done it! He was in his Jaguar form. He swung his head around and found himself surrounded by the others who had all shifted as well.

Let's run, Seth urged.

Noah didn't need to be asked twice. He took off, his four legs pounding into the warm earth. The others joined him and soon they were deep within the woods. Even though all Noah had to do

was glance down and he could see he had indeed turned into a Black Jaguar, he'd never felt like more of a member of his family.

For the first time, he'd truly felt like he'd come home.

They ran most of the night, but Noah still felt an exhilarated high unlike anything he'd ever experienced before. He even sang in the car on the way home. This time, instead of *Tik Tok*, he belted out Lady GaGa's *Telephone*.

Then again, he had a lot to sing about. He'd managed his first shift, he'd made peace with Mitchell and best of all, Seth had moved into the family apartment that afternoon.

"I do have one question," Noah said as they walked back into headquarters. "What happens to our clothes when we shift? I mean, we are wearing them when we start, but when we shift back into our human forms, our clothes are still there. They don't even have wrinkles in them. It's kind of freaky."

"Thank you! That's exactly the same thing I asked my first time, too," Jacyn exclaimed.

"Should I tell him the same thing I told you?" Logan asked his mate in a bland tone. When Jacyn nodded, Logan turned to Noah. "In the past year and a half you've been kidnapped, shifted into a Jaguar, been chased by giant homicidal birds and

none of that affected you. Yet when you stop to think about what happens to your clothes when you turn, that's what gives you the heebies?"

Noah considered that for a moment before he laughed. "I guess you have a point there."

Keegan came rushing from Carson's office. "You guys need to get in here real quick."

"If they are trying to get me to watch that disgusting cup video again, I'm going to kick their asses. When are they going to learn I'm not going to fall for it like Seth did?" Mitchell groused.

They all went in. Since the family had grown while the office remained the same size, it made for a tight squeeze, but they managed. Noah ended up squashed next to Keegan on the battered couch.

"Good thing you all made it back in time. His email said he'd be contacting us at four in the morning," Carson said by way of greeting.

Noah glanced up at the clock and saw they had one minute to spare. "Who are you talking about?"

"Andy," Carson supplied grimly.

Everyone in the room sucked in a collective breath at the name of their last lost sibling. Before anyone could ask more questions, the computer monitor blinked to life and the image of a man popped onto the screen.

He looked almost exactly like Brent, with the

same narrow features and build. The only differences were Andy had his speckled hair cut a little longer and he looked younger. A sardonic grin twisted his lips. "Well, look at all of you. You have the *Waltons, John and Kate, plus the Partridges* all beat."

"Andy, is that really you?" Cassie breathed as she moved closer the screen.

"I prefer Andrew, but yes, it's me," Andy replied in clipped tones.

Cassie gave a slightly hesitant nod. "Okay, we can call you that if you like."

He flicked a dismissive glance over her. "Boy, even with this crappy feed, I can tell you're shorter than hell. I guess it's a good thing you have so many brothers around to protect your back."

"Is it just me or does he sound kind of like a dick?" Noah whispered to Keegan.

"I was just thinking the same thing," Keegan replied.

Andy somehow must have picked up their whispers because his gaze swung their way. "Oh, look, it's my littermates—Keegan, who's too smart for his own good, and the little street rat, Noah."

Both Seth and Carson let out low growls, but Mitchell silenced them with a motion of his hands. "Why don't you tell us where you are and I can send one of my men out to bring you home."

Andy gave a slow shake of his head. "I don't think so. In fact, the trackers you've already sent out to find me have been making my life way too difficult as it is."

"Why not?" Mitchell demanded. He had that glint in his eyes that always warned Noah not to push him any further. Andy, on the other hand, either didn't notice or just plain could care less that he was pissing off one powerful shifter.

"This may come as a blow to your overinflated ego, but not everyone wants to be part of the great Mitchell's family," Andy snapped in return.

"Then why in the hell did you bother to contact us?" Brent asked, his face red with anger.

"Because I want to tell you to back the fuck off. I don't want to be found. I don't want to be part of your coalition and I definitely don't want to be part of the Feline Family Bunch. I just had to take care of the last tracker you sent after me and the disruption in my schedule upset me."

A chill ran up Noah's spine as the implication of those words hit him. He'd once heard that every family had one crazy in it and they were obviously looking at their loony.

"You better not have harmed him. Luther has a family at home, waiting for him," Mitchell snarled.

Noah's heart pounded at the anger in his brother's voice. He didn't think he'd ever seen

Mitchell this worked up.

Andy rolled his eyes. "Don't worry, I didn't kill him. I just detained him for a while."

The image on the screen flicked over to what looked like surveillance footage. While the quality was grainy and not in color, the image of a large man pacing a small room was clearly visible.

"Where is he?" Mitchell demanded.

"In a vault room." Even though the image remained on the room, Andy's voice still carried through the speakers. "I got the idea from an episode of *Family Guy*. Look! I even put a little white dog in there with him so he could have his own *Brian*."

Right before the image changed back, Noah did see there was indeed a small dog in the room with Luther.

Andy grinned, obviously pleased with himself. "Of course, I couldn't lock him up in a bank, so it's not exactly like the show, but it's close enough."

"Where is he?" Mitchell snarled.

Andy's grin faded and he replaced it with a cold, hard mask. "If you want favors, then you should really learn how to ask more nicely, Mitchell. Now poor Luther is going to have to wait another hour before I email you the address of where he's at."

"You won't be able to get away from all of us," Mitchell warned.

The grin returned to Andy's face. "Oh, I think I will. By the way, don't think I don't know Carson's been trying to trace this transmission the entire time we've been having this conversation. Maybe it's time for him to learn a little lesson as well."

Before anyone could reply, the screen went blank. It only lasted a moment before another image popped up. This time it was the *Dramatic Chipmunk* viral video.

"No! No! No!" Carson yelled as he typed furiously on his keyboard. "That little shit has just locked up all of our systems."

As if on cue, the lights went out, plunging them into darkness for a few seconds before the green emergency lights came on.

"I don't care if he's your brother or not. As soon as I get my hands on that little punk, I'm going to nail his ass to my office wall," Carson seethed.

"How long before you can get everything back up?" Mitchell asked as he ran a hand through his hair.

Carson made a fuck-if-I-know gesture with his hands. "A couple hours, maybe."

"I'll help you," Keegan offered.

Mitchell turned to Brent. "I want you to get Vapor here and tell him I have a new mission for him."

"You can't send Vapor after Andy," Noah

protested. Vapor was big and mean looking with a black buzz cut and an even blacker heart.

"I don't have a choice," Mitchell said grimly.
"By kidnapping a coalition member and hacking into our computer system, Andy just broke the law."

"That means Vapor won't be going out on a rescue mission. He'll be going out to apprehend a wanted fugitive," Brent added before he pressed his lips in a grim line.

"I'm sure once Andy comes home, he'll be able to explain all this," Noah rushed to defend his littermate.

Seth came over and put an arm around Noah's shoulder. "That's just it, baby. Andy won't be going home. He'll be going to prison."

"And our prisons are a whole lot worse than any human facility," Cassie finished as she wrapped her arms around her waist.

Noah leaned into Seth and allowed himself to take some comfort in his mate's touch. He had a feeling the whole family would be needing all the support they could get over the next few months.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephani Hecht is a happily married mother of two. You can usually find her snuggled up to her laptop, creating her next book.

Stephani's email:
archangelwriter@yahoo.com
Stephani's website:
www.stephanihecht.com
Stephani's MySpace:
http://www.myspace.com/stephanihecht