



KIM DARE

CAMERON'S PRIDE

THROWN
TO THE
LIONS

Cameron's Pride

A Thrown to the Lions Story

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Resplendence Publishing, LLC

<http://www.resplendencepublishing.com>

Resplendence Publishing, LLC
2665 S Atlantic Avenue, #349
Daytona Beach, FL 32176

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Edited by Christine Allen-Riley and Jason Huffman

Cover art by Les Byerley www.les3photo8.com

Electronic format ISBN: 978-1-60735-223-5

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Electronic release: December 2010

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To healing wounds

Chapter One

"I'm looking for a lion called Caramel."

For several seconds, Franklin Hamilton strained his ears. He could feel several pairs of eyes running over his naked body, but no one spoke up to either confirm or deny Caramel's presence in the lions' den.

Franklin took a deep breath. The heat from the fire he could feel burning to his right, raced into his lungs. It scorched and seemed to threaten to suffocate him after the colder air that had filled the...the driveway, he supposed it must have been. It was hard to be certain of anything while the blindfold covered his eyes.

There was only one thing Franklin felt sure of. Caramel was there. He had to be. Franklin shuffled his feet against the rug beneath him as he waited for someone to speak, for Caramel to make his existence known.

Eyes continued to rake over Franklin's exposed body, he could sense other men's attention surrounding him. If his hands hadn't been cuffed behind him, he might have actually given in to a display of weakness and brought them in front of his crotch in an effort to cover himself. As it was, there was nothing he could do but wait and hope he'd finally managed to track down the man he was looking for.

Franklin squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. There would be no weakness, not from him.

A hand suddenly brushed against the back of his head. Before Franklin could react, it deftly unfastened the buckle holding his blindfold in place. The leather fell away from his face. There was no light other than the fire burning in the grate, but, after so long in complete darkness, Franklin was still half-blinded by the flickering flames.

Quickly turning his face away from the blaze, he only managed to catch the briefest glimpse of the man in front of him out of the very corner of his eye. That was still sufficient for him to realize that he wasn't facing the pretty little dancer he was looking for.

Franklin had spent more than enough hours staring at Caramel while the shifter had been on stage to be able to recognize him instantly. The lion he wanted was all lean lines of graceful muscle, high cheekbones and tumbling golden locks.

As Franklin's eyes adjusted to the firelight, he quickly ran his gaze over the man before him. He couldn't have been more different to the man Franklin expected to see.

"What do you know about Caramel?" the man demanded, as he glared down at Franklin, making full use of any psychological advantage his greater height might give him.

He was indeed taller than Franklin, and he was older, and broader across the shoulders too. If anyone had asked Franklin to picture the kind of person who might be capable of turning into a wild animal at the slightest provocation, the man before him would have fulfilled all the requirements perfectly.

Strengthening his body language as best he could while still bound, Franklin squared his stance and refused to show the slightest hint of fragility.

Just because everyone was naked, that didn't mean this was all that different to a board meeting. The same psychology applied. The shifters were probably just slightly more honest about the kill or be killed nature of their dealings with each other.

"Where's Caramel?" Franklin demanded, in exactly the same tone he'd have used with the head of a major project that was over-budget, behind schedule, and swirling around the bottom of the drain.

Apparently, that voice didn't work on lions. Humans twice Franklin's age had panicked when they heard it, and suddenly realized working for a twenty-four year old wouldn't be the easy ride they expected. The feline in front of him didn't even blink.

"I asked you, what do you know about Caramel?" the larger man reminded him, perfectly calmly.

A movement from the corner of Franklin's eye caught his attention. He turned toward a smaller, younger man. The pretty little blond boy's hand came to rest gently on the forearm of the man in front of Franklin, as if he was trying to soothe the larger man's temper.

The boy met Franklin's gaze without any hesitation, but there was no challenge in his expression only a kind of serious curiosity. "This is Ellery," he said, softly. "My name's Kefir."

Silence descended. Franklin got the distinct impression the younger man would wait however long it took to be offered the same information in return, even if that turned out to be hours—or even days.

“Franklin Hamilton,” he provided, impatient to move on to more important matters as quickly as possible.

Kefir smiled encouragingly up at him. “And you’re looking for Cameron—for a feline dancer that calls himself Caramel?”

“Yes.” Franklin tried to peer past them and spot Caramel in the shadows. It wasn’t easy while Ellery continued to stand directly in front of him, blocking his view.

“So are we.”

“What?” Franklin’s attention snapped back to Kefir.

“We’ve been looking for him for some time,” the smaller man said. “If you have information then...”

“He’s not here?” Franklin demanded.

Ellery shifted his stance the moment Franklin raised his voice. He obviously didn’t like anyone shouting at his...Franklin glanced at Kefir and took note of the silver collar around the younger man’s neck...Ellery’s human submissive.

Franklin looked from one man to the other, then back again. It was time to cut to the bones of the matter. “I’ll pay you for any information you have.”

Kefir tilted his head to one side, as if he didn’t really understand the concept. Ellery’s expression was far more knowing. He might not be as impressed with the offer as Franklin had hoped, but at least he seemed to understand the theory.

“Perhaps, if we all sit down and tell each other what we know, that would help?” Kefir suggested.

Ellery nodded. They both stepped back, giving Franklin his first unobstructed view of the room. Over a dozen shifters sat in pairs and groups. Mixed in with them appeared to be a few human submissives, like Kefir.

As Ellery took a seat in one of the armchairs, the smaller man sat at his feet, for all the world like a well trained pet.

It wouldn’t do to let the man think all humans could be treated the same way. “Do you intend to remove my cuffs?” Franklin asked, pointedly.

“No.” Ellery said it as if he had every right to keep him bound for however long he damn well pleased.

Boardroom survival skills made Franklin’s next move clear. He didn’t even hesitate. “Are all lions so afraid of humans that they insist they must remain bound in their presence, or is it just you?”

Ellery’s reaction should have been easy to predict. He *should* have tensed at the insult and risen to the challenge. Franklin frowned as the other man’s lips twitched as if he was trying to bite back a sudden smile.

“I wouldn’t know,” Ellery eventually said. “Not being a lion.”

Franklin blinked at him.

Ellery’s smile broke through. Against all logic, it didn’t make the man look the least bit friendlier. If anything, he just looked hungry.

Franklin glanced at Kefir. The younger man did look far more like Caramel than Ellery ever could. He didn’t have the dancer’s build, or his grace of line. His hair was shorter. But, there was definitely something around the eyes, something...feline?

Vehement curses rolled around Franklin’s head, but he didn’t let them out. Pushing the whole matter aside and ignoring his mistake as if it had never happened, he pushed on, instead. “Is Caramel a member of this pride or not? I was told this is the only male pride in the area that accepts male sacrifices.”

“That much is true.”

Franklin spun around. Another armchair was occupied by another man with much the same build and manner as Ellery. He also had a younger man sitting at his feet. Franklin took a moment to study both men’s eyes, looking for any feline qualities there before he made a fool of himself again.

The older man had a dark mane of hair and a glint in his eye that marked him out as the more likely candidate.

“Who’s in charge here?” Franklin demanded, looking from that man to Ellery and back again.

“Joseph Arslan,” the man with the mane introduced himself. “I lead this pride. But, Kefir is the lion in charge of our search for Cameron.”

“How much?” Franklin asked him, never taking his eyes off Arslan.

Arslan’s eyes narrowed. “Excuse me?”

“How much money do you want in exchange for ordering all the lions in your pride to give me any information they have on Caramel’s whereabouts?” Franklin specified, impatience rushing through every word as he realized he seemed to have stumbled into an entire room full of men who had no idea how business was conducted.

The fire continued to burn as brightly as ever, but the temperature in the room somehow seemed to drop. It was all Franklin could do not to let a shiver run down his spine.

“And if you find him, what do you intend to do then?” Arslan asked.

Franklin glared down his nose at the seated shifter. “I fail to see what concern that would be of yours.”

Arslan smiled. It wasn’t a particularly friendly expression. “You’re standing in a room full of lions who could easily tear you limb from limb. If you fail to refer to his mate with due respect again, Ellery can probably add a human to that number. Insults are not your best course of action.”

“It wasn’t an insult, it was a business offer,” Franklin corrected. “You have information I want, and I’m prepared to pay very handsomely to get it.”

“Did you pay Kershaw to throw you to us tonight as well?” Arslan asked.

The more politely the lion spoke, the more tense the man sitting at his feet became. Franklin had known a secretary like that once, she had always been the best indication of her boss’ mood.

Franklin studied the submissive at Arslan’s feet, eager to gain any advantage before negotiations began in earnest. Apparently, he stared at him for a second too long.

Suddenly Arslan wasn’t sitting placidly in his chair, he was standing directly in front of Franklin, looming over him, a snarl building in the back of his throat.

“Yes,” Franklin rushed out, helpless to do anything else. “I paid Kershaw.”

“And what do you intend to pay Cameron to do if you succeed in tracking him down?” Arslan demanded.

Franklin tried to meet the older man’s gaze and hold it, but it was damn near impossible to out-stare a man who didn’t appear to need to blink.

As the seconds passed, it was all Franklin could do to hold his ground when his body begged him to take several rapid steps back. “That would be between myself and Cameron,” he managed to say. Habit held him in good stead. The words were neither as weak nor uncertain as he feared they might be.

Arslan made a disgusted noise in the back of his throat as he spun away from him.

"Humans!"

The leader of the pride ran his fingers through his lover's hair as he rejoined him, perhaps in apology for insulting his submissive's species, perhaps not.

Franklin turned toward Kefir as he automatically sought out a weaker link to bargain with.

"You've seen him recently?" the smaller lion asked, his tone as mild as ever.

"A few weeks ago," Franklin admitted.

"Where?" There was nothing mild about the way Ellery barked out his question.

Franklin considered his options. Searching for the other man on his own wasn't working. Would it really be such a bad idea to use the pride to track the shifter down? They couldn't do any worse than the private detectives Franklin had already invested a fortune in.

"In a night club on the other side of town," he replied.

Within minutes, Kefir and Ellery had a whole selection of maps and notebooks spread out across the table on the far side of the room and they were both pouring over them with Franklin. The other shifters and their mates moved around them, tucking into the plates full of food that had been pushed to one side. But, as the other lions turned their attention to conversations on other matters, Franklin stayed at the table with the little lion and his master.

When Ellery finally undid his cuffs so he could help them sort through the papers, Franklin quickly found himself in his element. Putting together the clues wasn't that different to putting together a business deal, and Franklin knew how good he was at those.

The other two men had already done most of the grunt work. No doubt they would be far from pleased when they discovered he had no intention of sharing Caramel with the pride when they finally found him.

With a mental shrug, Franklin gave all his attention to the notebook where Kefir's neat writing listed the places that the dancer might be. Their hurt feelings weren't his problem. And anyway, in his experience, there were few actions that couldn't be forgiven if a man threw enough money at the offended parties.

* * * *

Bastard!

Cameron let out a snarl as he felt the atmosphere in the club change.

The stripper who'd been getting changed next to him almost fell over his own feet as he tried to scurry away and pull on his trousers at the same time. The shifter barely spared a glance at his rapidly retreating colleague.

He was back.

The lion's claws crept out as the other man's presence filled his senses. The man who'd been watching him on that night when Cameron had decided it was time to move on and display his talents on another stage was in *this* club now, and—

Cameron frowned as feline senses registered something else.

Lions!

It had been so long since he'd been in the presence of another shifter, Cameron almost doubted himself. Almost. A man didn't survive long working in clubs like that, or dealing with the kind of men who liked to buy more than a dance off the performers, if he wasn't willing to trust his instincts and learn how to spot certain warning signs.

Cameron knew without question when the guy watching him dance was about to reach for his wallet. He could tell when the man who'd paid for the pleasure was going to reach for a whip, too. And he'd learned how to know when a punter was going to turn out to be one of those guys who delighted in seeing his friends beat the hell out of the boy whose body he'd purchased for the night.

But, for all he'd learned about humans, Cameron still bloody well knew when he was in the presence of other lions.

"Caramel—you're on next! Move your—"

Spinning around to face the dressing room door, Cameron bared his teeth as he let out another snarl. The backstage manager retreated several stumbling paces. He only stopped when his shoulders hit the wall on the other side of the narrow corridor.

He pressed himself against the stained paintwork as Cameron stormed past him, heading straight for the scruffy curtain that separated the brightly lit stage from the shadowy world that existed behind it. He reached it just in time to see the last performer rush through the ragged gap in the velvet.

Sweat streaked his skin, dampening the notes that had been pushed into the strips of leather buckled around his limbs. "The guys at table three are generous," he rasped, more than a little out of breath after his performance. "Table five's drunk and even grabbier than usual. The top table is just bloody well weird."

On another night, Cameron might have paid attention to any information another dancer was willing to share with him. Right then, with anger pounding through his veins, he couldn't bring himself to care if the whole room was packed with sadists and skinflints.

Roughly thrusting aside the curtain, Cameron strode out onto the stage. He was halfway down the raised platform when he stopped and stood perfectly still in the crosshairs of the spotlight.

The DJ in the booth on the far side of the club let the music play for a full thirty seconds before he seemed to realize that Cameron wasn't dancing to his tune that night.

A harsh electronic sound shot through the speakers. The song died. Sudden silence invaded the room. Even the other employees at the club stopped serving the customers and turned their attention to Cameron.

Cameron barely noticed that. He only had eyes for the other shifters.

The top table—the weird guys who'd freaked out the other dancer so much—Cameron should have guessed that was where the lions would be sitting. Cameron tilted back his chin, refusing to show any weakness before any of the other werelions.

Even from across the room, he could see everything in their expressions. Neither the pity nor the contempt they felt for him could have been clearer if they'd been nose to nose, claw to claw.

And they'd known he was there. Cameron didn't need to question the fact—every instinct he possessed screamed it at him. They'd known he was there, and they'd come to the club anyway.

They'd come there to see a lion dance for the humans, to shake his arse for their loose change and to whore himself out to the highest bidder at the end of the night.

Cameron's gaze went from one lion to the next, skimming over the humans who sat with them, until his attention finally fell upon the one man whose presence he'd been trying to ignore ever since he stepped onto the stage.

He sat at the same table as the lions, but he'd moved his chair slightly away from them, as if he didn't consider himself to be part of their group. At least, there was no pity in that man's eyes. He was all lust, all desire—not just to screw a pretty dancer, but to buy, to own, to possess someone completely.

Cameron had learned how to spot the men who didn't just pay for it because they had to, years ago. The lion ran his gaze over him then, from the neatly cut brown hair, over his expensive

suit, all the way down to his handmade shoes. It was obvious that he wouldn't have any trouble getting laid in any club for free. No doubt he only paid for it because he liked the control it gave him, the power to be able to order the man he'd bought, to do whatever he wanted.

Dragging his gaze away from him, Cameron struggled to force his claws to morph back into something more like human nails. He turned his attention to the pride of lions once more. If they wanted to see a show, fine. He'd give them a show.

Closing his eyes, Cameron let the music start up inside his mind, picking up just where it had left off in reality. Very slowly, almost imperceptibly, he started to rock his hips. The DJ wasn't an idiot. He'd worked in those kind of clubs long enough to become good at his job. He spotted the rhythm. Within moments, real music crept into the air to match that which played inside the lion's head.

Cameron let his hips thrust forward a little more obviously as he reached for the hem of his t-shirt and ran his fingers along its edge. The music was starting to seep deeper into him now, coaxing his heart to beat a little more steadily, even as it encouraged his hips to move more freely.

Slowly, he opened his eyes and looked around the tables spaced out around the floor. Pair after pair of entranced eyes peered up at him. Cameron's lips twitched into a bitter little smile. This was the way to survive in clubs like that—show the punters who was boss right from the start.

Stepping forward, Cameron lethargically pulled the tight white t-shirt up over his head and tossed it behind him onto the stage. Every eye in the club followed him. Another pace forward, and he left one battered trainer behind. His second shoe slipped off his other foot a moment later.

A silver pole was anchored firmly into the boards two thirds of the way down the stage. By the time he was a yard and a half away from it, part of Cameron was willing to believe that night was no different to any other. The rhythm of the music sped up another notch and, right then, he wasn't Cameron, he was Caramel, and he owned the whole damn world.

Leaping gracefully into the air, the lion caught the pole in one hand, and spun around it. His leg twisted back and hooked around the length of metal. A gasp went up from the audience, and, while he danced at least, the men who watched him were Caramel's, to do with as he wished.

Tightening his hold on the pole, Cameron let himself play with his favorite toy. Feline grace, a lion's strength, and a shifter's agility made the pole little more than a game for him.

As he swirled around it again, he felt the energy in the room double over and over again. Some of the tension created by that man's presence started to dissipate from his muscles.

Who cared who was watching? He was there to be seen.

Cameron's hair whipped around his head, long blond strands falling forward and covering his eyes. That wasn't important. He wasn't looking at what he was doing, and there was no way in hell the men there were looking at his face while his hips continued with their rhythm.

With every minute that passed, the music raced faster, until all Cameron could think about was keeping up with the beat and maintaining his hold on the pole. That song, his song, had been played for him so many times, his body knew every note.

He let go of the pole. The momentum he'd built up as he swirled around it, carried him several yards through the air. He landed, crouched on the very edge of the raised stage at the exact same moment as the music stopped.

He hadn't changed into the clothes he usually performed in before he stormed the stage. Cameron was still wearing his jeans. Pulling himself up to his full height, he tossed his hair back from his face and ran his hands through it, letting his fingers tangle into the wild lengths and tug at the strands as he raised his gaze and dared any man in the room to meet his eyes.

None of them did. Most of them were still too busy staring further down his body anyway. Cameron let his hand follow their gazes across his chest and down his abs to the top of his jeans.

Very slowly he unbuckled the brown leather belt that still held the denim up. As he withdrew it from the loops on his jeans, his other hand toyed with the top button of his fly. The bitter, little smile crept back to his lips as he sensed the expectation develop in the men around him.

Holding the belt doubled over in his right hand, he deftly undid the buttons with the other, revealing the line of golden blond hairs that traced a path down to his crotch. In no mood to be coy and tease any further, he simply pushed the denim down and let it pool around his ankles.

The belt stayed in his right hand as the fingers of his left hand wrapped around his exposed cock. Half hard already, his shaft quickly stiffened further under his own touch.

Ignoring everything else, he let his audience see his pleasure. He gave them a few minutes to wonder how much it would cost them if they wanted the privilege of being able to touch him that way, or maybe of getting his hand to move to their cocks instead.

Gracefully kicking away the tangle of denim from his feet, Cameron strode down the steps leading off the stage and into the crowd.

No one moved. No hands reached out to him. No one dared.

Making his way between the tables, his body moving to the music that had taken over from the first song, his hand continued to work his cock.

Cameron made sure he let everyone get a good look at him from every angle. The harder their cocks were, the more generous their wallets were. Glancing contemptuously at their crotches, he knew that there would be some high bids for his time that night.

Some part of Cameron wanted to believe that he wasn't heading for any particular table as he made his way around the room. Most of him was far too cynical to believe that kind of bull. He soon stood before the pride.

He kept his gaze up, refusing to show any hint of submission or weakness before them, daring them to look down on him. Some of them appeared just as fascinated by him, and just as likely to put in a bid, as half the humans had been. The leader of the pride, however, obviously wasn't one of his admirers.

So much anger and disapproval radiated from him, it was almost palpable. Cameron let his hips rock and his cock thrust more firmly against his own palm as he stepped closer to him. Like he cared what the old man thought of him!

Cameron smiled down at the leader, promising that he really didn't mind if it was a lion or a human who bought Caramel's time that night. Claws scraped against the table as the older man barely kept his temper in check.

Eyes glowing with success, Cameron turned toward the other lions, and the humans that sat with them, slowly making his way down the table.

One of the lions was wearing a collar. Cameron's hand almost faltered around his shaft as he saw it, the friction from his palm almost ceased to be enough to keep him up. He looked quickly to the man sitting on the little lion's right. He was undeniably human, and just as obviously considered himself the cub's master.

Cameron quickly turned his eyes away from the sight.

His gaze immediately fell on the last human in the group—the only one of them he'd set eyes on before, and the one he'd have given everything he possessed to never see again.

The human ran his eyes leisurely over Cameron's body as if calculating exactly what he was willing to pay for every inch of him. By the time he finally met Cameron's eyes, it was all the lion could do to stop his claws creeping out and tearing his own shaft to shreds.

He had no interest in a man like that, no desire to wear some rich bastard's collar and be kept as his pet until the guy grew bored with him. It was far better to whore his body out for an hour than to rent his soul for however long a punter wanted to keep it.

Still, he couldn't look away. Cameron's hand continued to work around his shaft, pushing him closer and closer to his climax as he stared into the other man's eyes. Something about him still crept past every sensible thought in his head and called to Cameron in a way he couldn't even begin to understand.

The scent, the sight, everything about the man demanded that he creep closer and find out more about him.

Cameron's feet moved without his brain's permission, until he stood right between the guy's negligently extended legs. Hips still rocking in time to the movement, Cameron let all the other men in the room fade from his mind.

Releasing his cock from his fist, Cameron raised his hands and he danced—not for a club full of men, but for one man.

It only took seconds for the guy to lift his hand off the arm of his chair and reach for him. Swaying back, just out of range, Cameron continued his performance, his body gyrating and grinding to the music as his hands pushed themselves through his hair again.

The man stood up, a frown gathering between his brows at Cameron's teasing. He obviously wasn't used to that, wasn't used to any man not giving him anything and everything he wanted just because he clicked his fingers. The rich brats were all the same.

Cameron's lips twisted as reality reasserted itself. He raised a contemptuous eyebrow and, without a single word, he turned his back on them all and made his way gracefully and languidly toward the gap in the curtains that took him back to the dressing rooms, to where one of the waiters would have tossed the clothes he'd discarded on the stage. He didn't turn and look over his shoulder. He didn't smile at the richest guy in the room and invite him to come back and find a private location to finish what they'd just hinted at starting in public.

The other dancers did that every night. But, in spite of everything, Cameron liked to believe he had more pride than that. He merely stepped through the curtains and strode quickly to the dressing room. Slamming the door behind him, he leaned back against it, his claws quickly tearing into the wood work as emotions he couldn't control tore through his mind and left nothing more than tattered shards in their wake.

In that moment, he wasn't quite sure what scared him more, the idea that the man would come back and ask how much it would cost to screw him, or that he *wouldn't* do that.

Chapter Two

Cameron made a point of ignoring the knock on the dressing room door. Whoever was outside didn't seem particularly concerned with that fact. A second later, the battered panel swung open regardless.

Keeping his back to the door, as if he didn't give a damn who was walking into the dressing room, Cameron stared into the mirror and kept his expression blank as he frantically searched the reflection for a glimpse of his visitor.

Him!

Before he even caught sight of the man in the glass, Cameron knew who it was. The guy's scent was unmistakable, even when mixed with an aftershave that was so expensive, he practically reeked of money.

"Hello."

Cameron said nothing as his visitor stepped forward. Finally he met the other man's eyes in the mirror, but he still didn't speak.

"My name's Franklin Hamilton."

Cameron bit back a snarl as the guy's tone of voice made his hackles rise. He introduced himself the same way loaded men always did—as if they assumed every single man on the planet would know the name and be impressed by it.

Turning around, Cameron leaned casually back against the stained little shelf set below the mirror that had been honored with the label of dressing table. He looked his guest up and down.

His own erection was barely hidden away behind a pair of low slung jeans, and, for reasons he didn't want to examine too closely, Cameron hadn't even bothered to do up the top

button of his fly. Still, he did his damndest to let Franklin Hamilton know he wasn't the least impressed with what he saw before him.

For several long seconds, they just stared across the room at each other. Finally, Cameron managed to bring words to his lips.

"How much did you pay the manager to let you back here?" He tightened his grip on the shelf behind him, as the words came out more like a seductive purr than a snarling demand.

"One hundred," Franklin said, apparently not the least embarrassed about the fact.

"And an extra hundred for the rest of us."

Cameron's attention snapped toward the view through the dressing room door. Franklin hadn't closed it behind him. The reason for that was suddenly obvious.

The lone shifter straightened up from his lounge against the dressing table, as he saw the entire pride of lions peering in at him from the corridor.

His anger peaked as they all strode into the small dressing room without waiting for any hint of invitation.

Cameron turned back to Franklin. "Friends of yours?" he spat.

"Temporary associates," Franklin said, quite calmly. "Since we were all searching for you, it made sense for us to pool our resources."

"And what do you intend to do with me now that you've found me?" Cameron demanded.

The answer was as easy to see in Franklin's eyes as it was in his tenting fly. But, the human didn't get a chance to say a word.

"We intend to bring you into our pride." The leader stepped forward. "Joseph Arslan. Some sort of distant cousin of yours, I believe." He held out a hand.

Cameron snarled at the gesture and hooked his thumbs firmly into the belt loops of his jeans.

Arslan merely stood there, hand outstretched, obviously not the least bit unsettled by Cameron's rejection.

"What the hell makes you think I want to be a member of your pride—of anyone's pride?" Cameron demanded.

"You're a lion."

Confidence radiated off the older shifter, as if nothing had ever made him doubt that a pride was where all lions belonged. The stupid old man had probably never strayed away from his pride for one day in his whole life!

"Where are you staying tonight?" someone else chipped in.

Cameron's gaze darted past Arslan's shoulder. A human stood at the leader's side.

"What?"

"I asked where you intended to sleep tonight?" the human repeated.

With whoever pays me the most to share his bed.

Cameron couldn't make those words leave his lips. Everyone in the room had probably guessed as much, anyway. And, suddenly, he wasn't so sure that throwing the facts of his life in their faces would humiliate *them*.

"Come and stay with us?" the same man asked.

Cameron looked him up and down, taking care that everyone should spot the gesture.

"Thanks, honey, but you're not my type."

"You're not his type either," Arslan snapped. "Show some respect!"

Cameron straightened up. He wasn't as tall as Arslan, or as broad across the shoulders, but he didn't falter. "Maybe I don't see anything here worth respecting."

He'd forgotten the older man's hand was still outstretched. Before he could react, the other lion's fist was wrapped around his wrist and pulling him forward as he twisted the limb up between them and sent a jolt of discomfort shooting up his arm.

Cameron still held the larger lion's gaze. It was discomfort, not pain. The other lion could easily have hurt him if he wanted to, but right then he was choosing not to.

The dancer hesitated.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Franklin burst out. He tugged at Arslan's arm. His struggles had no effect whatsoever on the shifter's hold on Cameron's arm.

"Yes, do be careful, darling," Cameron spat, as he suddenly remembered how the world really was. "Don't damage the merchandise. He's already invested far too much in me to see it wasted just because you can't control your temper."

"You're a lion, not some rich fool's toy—start acting like you know that," Arslan ordered.

As he let him go, the leader looked around the room. "Pack whatever you want to bring with you. You'll stay at the den until suitable arrangements can be made."

“What the hell makes you think I’m yours to command?” Cameron snarled, as he stepped back, stopping only when he reached the shelf.

“You’re a lion. You’re in my territory.” Arslan didn’t add anything else to those statements. He obviously didn’t think there was anything else he needed to say.

“This wasn’t what we agreed,” Franklin cut in.

Cameron immediately turned his attention toward him. The guy looked as if he was about to have a coronary—yet he still somehow managed to call to Cameron in a way no human ever had.

The leader of the pride looked from Franklin to Cameron and back again then, apparently trying to judge what they were to each other and what his next move should be.

Cameron’s heart raced faster than ever as he waited for Arslan’s verdict.

“You’re also welcome to stay with us,” the leader announced.

Cameron’s claws sliced clean through the shelf behind him. “I’m not—”

Arslan held up a hand. “In a separate room from Cameron’s,” he clarified. He turned back to Franklin. “We helped you find him. We won’t help you buy him. Your money will mean nothing to anyone at the den. Reach for your wallet, and you’ll be thrown out—immediately.”

Franklin looked toward Cameron then, so did every other pair of eyes in the room. He should have been used to being the center of attention after spending so many hours up on that damn stage. Still, he felt an uncomfortable shiver run down his spine.

He glanced uncertainly from one man to another until his eyes finally came to rest on the human who’d first invited him to stay with the pride.

“Ryland,” the man said. “I’m Arslan’s mate.” He held out his hand.

With his mind racing in a hundred different directions, habit and the kind of manners he’d thought he’d forgotten a lifetime ago, came to the fore. Cameron reached out and put his hand in Ryland’s. The human smiled. When he let go of Cameron’s hand, he gently released it in Arslan’s direction.

Cameron found himself shaking hands with the leader of the pride, too. And suddenly, it seemed everything had been decided, without his brain getting a single vote in the matter.

The next man holding out his hand was Franklin. Cameron turned toward him. The confusion inside him spiraled out of control. Part of him wanted nothing more than to reach out to him to touch him, and not just for some silly little handshake. He wanted to touch every inch

of him, strip him down and screw him right there in front of everyone, taste him and explore him and claim him in every way a lion could.

Another part of him roared just as loudly that everything would almost certainly be over the moment he laid hand on him. Once he gave in to that temptation, he'd never be able to find the strength to walk away from him. He should run now, while he still had the chance.

It was just a handshake. Franklin knew that. But it didn't change the fact that it still felt far better than anything quite a few of his one night stands had been able to do for him over the years. Just that tiny bit of skin on skin contact made Franklin's cock jerk behind his fly.

His eyes met Caramel's eyes for a second, but as quickly as he put his hand in Caramel's, or Cameron's, or whatever the hell his name was's hand, the shifter jerked his palm away. The lion spun away from him and snatched up the t-shirt that had been tossed carelessly over the back of a chair. He pulled the thin material over his head.

Damn, but he was stunning! Franklin let his attention linger on the lean lines of muscle for as long as possible before they were hidden away. Whatever the shifter wanted from him, it would obviously be worth every penny.

Scooping up a scruffy backpack, Cameron grabbed a denim jacket from a hook next to the mirror. That seemed to be it as far as his belongings went.

"My car's—" Franklin began as they all made their way out of the club.

"Cameron will ride with me and Ryland," Arslan cut in.

Franklin spun around to face him. Enough was enough. "What is your problem?"

Arslan raised an eyebrow at him. "My problem? I'm not the one standing in the car park screeching like a child having a tantrum."

Franklin took a deep breath as he glared up at the taller man. That wasn't true. The question might not have been framed perfectly politely, but he'd been bloody well careful to keep his voice down. Knowing all that, didn't change anything. Arslan had a true teacher's way of making it sound like whatever he said was perfectly accurate anyway.

By the time Franklin had spun away from Arslan, Ryland had already settled Cameron into the other man's car.

"We'll meet you back at the den," Arslan told him. "If it makes you feel any better, you can tail us all the way."

Franklin stormed back to his car and slammed the driver's door behind him. Keeping the professor's car in sight didn't actually make him feel any better about anything. His palm tingled where Cameron's skin had touched his.

They should still be touching. Even the smallest amount of space existing between them was far too much. Being in an entirely separate vehicle was intolerable.

Jumping out of the low slung sports car the moment it pulled up, in a flurry of gravel, outside the den, Franklin marched toward the other car and yanked open Cameron's door.

As the lion levered his long, graceful limbs out of the vehicle, Franklin couldn't make himself step back and give him extra room. Hell, he could barely keep his hands at his sides and stop himself reaching out to caress the shifter's body that second.

Clenching his hands into tight fists, he forced himself to look around at the men and lions that still surrounded them. There would be time enough for them to come to some sort of arrangement when they managed to find some privacy. Turning toward the house, he strode inside, determined to get to that point as quickly as possible.

An hour later, Franklin's hands had remained furled into fists for so long, they were beginning to cramp. There didn't seem to be any possibility of achieving any sort of privacy in the den. Hints, subtle and blatant, fell on deaf feline ears.

As it grew late and he was finally shown to his bedroom by Ryland, Franklin couldn't help but be acutely aware of the fact that it would be his room, not his and Cameron's room.

"Which will be Cameron's?" he asked as he was led along a corridor lined by doors.

Ryland hesitated for a moment. "Yours is just along here."

Franklin glared at the back of his head.

Ryland opened a door and pointed out where the en suite and the spare blankets were. "If you need anything else, Arslan's and my room is just at the end of the hall." He pointed to the appropriate door.

"And Cameron's room?" Franklin enquired again.

Ryland pushed his hands into his jeans pockets as he shrugged. "Sorry."

"Really?" Franklin snapped "You don't sound it." He strode along the length of the room, past the big double bed he was apparently destined to sleep in alone that night.

"He's had a rough time," Ryland reminded him. "Maybe a bit of breathing space is a good thing for both of you."

Franklin turned at the end of his pacing route and glared at the submissive as he realized there was no way in hell he could get his own way. “Enjoying your power trip?” he demanded.

“Not particularly. Power’s not my kink.” Ryland held his gaze as he said it, for all the world like a man who knew he was doing the right thing, and was going to bloody well keep doing it regardless of how uncomfortable it made him feel.

“I don’t suppose it’s occurred to you that I could make it worth your while if you—”

Ryland took a step back as if Franklin had slapped him. “The only thing that occurs to me, is that everyone should get some sleep. No one makes good decisions when they’re exhausted. Goodnight.” He closed the door behind him.

Franklin strode across to the door, only to stop with his hand wrapped around the handle. What the hell was he going to do, storm through the upper floor opening every door, waking every lion in the house as he searched for the only one he had any interest in finding?

Franklin stamped across to the bed and sat on the edge of the mattress. Leaning back, he lay across the width of the bed and stared up at the ceiling. It wasn’t quite the way he intended to spend the first night he and Cameron were under the same roof.

There had to be a way to get to the other man...

Franklin tapped his fingers on his stomach as he tried to work out his next move. There was always a next move—if a man had the brains to see it and the financial resources to make the most of it—always.

Now, if Franklin could just bloody well work out what it was...

He had no idea how long he lay there, with his legs hanging over the side of the bed. It was at least enough time to get used to the silence of the supposedly sleeping house and jump when his door handle rattled.

He’d only just managed to lever himself up onto his elbow when he saw the heavy mahogany panel swing open.

Cameron stepped inside, full to the brim with confidence and self-assurance, as if he had no doubt that he already owned Franklin’s room and everything it in.

Pushing the door closed, the shifter leaned casually back against it. Thumbs hooked into his empty belt loops, he glared at Franklin. Off guard, and still half lying back on the bed, all Franklin could do was stare back in confusion.

The jeans appeared to be the only thing the lion was wearing. His chest was bare, so were his feet. Franklin ran his gaze over every inch of exposed skin being displayed to him with due

appreciation. Caramel—*Cameron's* jeans had slid down low enough that it was obvious he still wasn't wearing anything underneath them.

The lion's lips twisted into a vague approximation of a smile as their eyes met. He lifted one perfectly shaped blonde eyebrow. "I'd ask if you'd seen anything you like, but I think we both know the answer to that one, already."

Franklin finally dragged two brain cells together and sat up. "Oh?"

Cameron pushed himself away from the door. "I saw the way you watched me dance."

"Yes," Franklin didn't see any point in hiding that. He didn't try to cover his growing erection as it tented his trousers either.

Cameron stepped forward without another word, until he stood directly before Franklin.

Franklin immediately reached out. His hands were barely an inch away from the younger man's skin when he found his fingers batted away.

"You're not in some sleazy strip club now," the lion snarled. "And you're not in the alley way behind one, either."

Franklin was halfway to his feet when Cameron's hand met his chest and pushed him roughly back onto the mattress. He fell, sprawling as his hands slid across the blankets. "What the hell!"

Cameron merely loomed over him, glaring down at him as if he was the one who had every right to be pissed off.

Damn, but he actually made the whole 'stunning while psychotically angry' bull that people spouted make sense. Adrenaline flooded into Franklin's veins. Suddenly not finding himself in quite so much of a rush to jump to his feet and take control of the situation as he thought he'd be, Franklin leaned back on his elbow once more. For some reason, he found himself simply waiting to see what would happen next.

Giving up even that tiny bit of control to the other man, sent a jolt of discomfort racing through him, but pleasure was hot on its heels—and every ounce of it rushed straight to his cock. For then, at least, pleasure won out.

Cameron's eyes narrowed as he frowned down at him, as if he expected it might be some sort of trap. Even when the lion leaned forward and reached for Franklin's fly, his eyes never left his face.

Tugging down the zipper, the shifter pulled both Franklin's trousers and his boxer briefs to his knees. His cock sprung free from the confines of the fabric as he was exposed completely to the other man's inspection.

Franklin's hands fisted into the blankets on either side of his body as he raised his hips to make it easier for the lion to strip him down. As he lowered his arse back down to the bed, Franklin had to use every scrap of self control at his disposal to force himself to stay silent and just let the other man do as he pleased with him.

Resting a knee on the sheet between Franklin's legs, Cameron calmly leaned further forward and dipped his head over his lap.

His tongue was rough. It shocked a gasp out of Franklin as Cameron licked along the underside of his erection, from base to tip. The coarse, pleasure filled sound made the lion look up.

Dominance and success mingled in Cameron's gaze as he ran his fingers through the long blond stands that fell down into his face, pushing them out of his eyes.

Steadying Franklin's shaft with his other hand, the shifter bobbed his head lower and took Franklin's cock into his mouth for the first time. Wet heat surrounded him. Franklin's hips immediately bucked in response, trying to push him further between the lion's impossibly soft lips as the rough feline tongue rasped against his shaft once more.

A snarl vibrated around him. Cameron's hands moved to Franklin's hips. His palms were hot too. As he looked down, he saw the shifter's nails morph slowly into claws and lightly pierce his skin. Finally, Franklin's hands remembered how to do something other than cling to the blankets.

He frantically tried to tug at Cameron's wrists and yank the vicious looking talons away from him, but the claws merely sunk more deeply into Franklin's flesh. A muffled sound, half snarl and half roar vibrated against his cock.

Cameron lowered his mouth around Franklin's shaft again, taking him to the base as he ignored all of Franklin's attempts to get his attention.

The pin prick of claws mingled in with all the other sensations the lion was pushing into his body. The heat from his touch and his mouth was unlike anything he'd ever known, unlike any human.

As he stared down at the lion, it was almost easy for Franklin to put aside the little bursts of pain as they mixed in with his pleasure, almost easy to like them and to like being held down against the bed, as well.

Releasing the lion's wrists, he hesitantly moved his hands away from the other man's skin, freeing him to do as he pleased. The vibrations of a purr rewarded him for that.

As he pulled back a little, Cameron's tongue danced over the tip of Franklin's cock, rough and demanding as he licked and sucked around him. Franklin wriggled slightly on the bed, in an effort to half sit up so he could look down at him properly.

Cameron half snarled again, as if daring Franklin to try to move without his permission.

Something inside Franklin yelled that he didn't need anyone's permission to do whatever the hell he wanted. The man who paid the piper called the tune, and that man was him—that man was always him. In a business meeting or in bed, weakness wasn't an option.

Cameron should be the one to do as he wanted. Franklin had no doubt about that. But, just for a little while, maybe it would be fun to *pretend* that wasn't the case—to pretend he was the guy who was taking the orders. Something inside Franklin screamed that was the right thing for him to do, easily drowning out the yell from the other part of him.

Franklin carefully stilled, as if he had no choice but to obey the order. It wasn't easy. His body wasn't used to being prevented from doing whatever the hell it wanted with a lover. Franklin tensed his muscles as he fought to control them. That on its own seemed to somehow make every sensation more intense, until the act of trying to stay still itself, seemed to make remaining motionless harder and more pleasurable than ever.

His fingers bit into the blankets, bunching them in his hands as he stared along his body at the lion. Cameron's lips narrowed out into a thin pink line as his movements quickened.

The shifter's mane of hair fell forward into his face again, blocking Franklin's view. With any other man, he'd have reached out and pushed the strands aside, or simply ordered his lover to do that himself. But right then, it felt far more like Cameron had taken away his permission to watch him, maybe even as if he hadn't earned the privilege to see every detail.

While something inside him suddenly whimpered its enjoyment with only being able to catch glimpses of the lion's face as the shifter went down on him, Franklin's hands remained firmly on the blankets.

Faster again, Cameron dipped his head over Franklin's crotch, sucking his cock deep into his mouth until it pressed against the back of his throat. He knew what he was doing. He'd obviously had plenty of practice at eliminating his gag reflex.

Franklin frowned. For the first time in his life, he wondered if he wanted his lover to have had that much experience with other men, if he wanted the man going down on him to know how to suck him off like a pro because he effectively was one.

Then, that didn't matter, because every thought in Franklin's brain gave in to the waves of pleasure crashing through his body. He cried out as his orgasm tore through him. Tossing his head back, his hips bucked as he came.

Cameron's head remained bowed over his lap, his lips sealed firmly around Franklin's cock as he spilled into the shifter's mouth. The lion's tongue rasped against the tip of his erection again and again, as if determined to coax every last drop of cum from him.

Even when Franklin collapsed back onto the bed, Cameron remained where he was, suckling roughly around his cock as it softened. When the lion finally pulled away, Franklin barely had enough energy to blink open his eyes and look up at him.

"Happy now?" the lion demanded as he rose to his full height and loomed over him.

It seemed a bloody stupid question under the circumstances. Franklin merely stared up at the other man.

"That's what you tracked me down for, wasn't it?" Cameron demanded.

"You want to hear me say that I wanted you to suck me off from the first moment I saw you?" Franklin asked. It wasn't that big a bargaining chip—he didn't try to hold onto it for no reason. With a shrug, he gave another man what he wanted for once. "Fine—that was exactly what I wanted."

"Good." Cameron had already stormed across the room and wrapped his fingers around the door handle by the time he looked over his shoulder at him. "And since you've got what you wanted, there's no need for you to hang around for breakfast is there?"

It was nothing more nor less than a blatant bloody dismissal. "What?" Franklin spluttered as he sat up.

"You know where the front door is, I'm sure you can afford the cab fare back to wherever you live if you're not up to driving yourself." And, as easily as that, the shifter walked away.

Franklin glared at the door Cameron had left half open behind him. As the seconds passed, he gradually pulled together enough brain cells to make a decision. Doing up his fly, he made his way to the bedroom door, and closed it. No one dismissed Franklin Hamilton.

Chapter Three

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Franklin looked up from the business pages of the newspaper he'd found among those that graced the lions' breakfast table. He immediately met Cameron's gaze, but he took another sip of his coffee before he deigned to answer. “I'm checking the financial section. Good morning to you, too.”

Cameron remained in the doorway until another lion nudged at his back in an effort to clear a path toward the food. The dancer stepped forward, still glaring at Franklin as if he'd offered him some sort of mortal insult simply by existing.

“You said you were leaving,” Cameron snarled, apparently not in the least concerned that most of the pride was there listening to them.

“No,” Franklin said, turning to the next page in the paper. “You said I should leave. That's quite different. I don't believe I've ever given you any reason to think I'm the kind of man who'll obey your orders.” He lowered his gaze to the text in front of him.

He hadn't given him reason. Franklin was sure of that. He'd run their time together the previous night over and over in his head. He'd lain back and let the other man do all the work. That was all.

As he tried to focus on the words in the story, the only thing he was really aware of, was the lion glaring at him. A shiver ran down his spine. A stupid little voice in the back of Franklin's head wanted him to back down and apologize. He shook out his paper in an effort to hide his discomfort.

He had nothing to apologize for. And if there was going to be any backing down to be done, he sure as hell wasn't going to be the man doing it.

Reaching past his paper he picked up his mug and took another sip of his coffee. It should be almost impossible for a lion, even one as stunning as the dancer, to get another guy hard just by standing perfectly still on the other side of a room. Franklin snuck a peek at Cameron past the corner of his paper as he tried not to squirm too obviously in his seat. Somehow the lion was bloody well managing it.

“Would you like some breakfast, Cameron?”

Franklin glanced toward the other end of the table. Arslan’s submissive was smiling across at Cameron, inviting him to take a chair at his side.

The shifter glared at Franklin for several seconds before he walked across the room with more feline grace than anyone should be able to pack into just a few steps, and sat on the chair. Pulling one foot up to rest on the cushioned seat in front of him, Cameron leaned negligently against the carved mahogany back and resumed glaring at Franklin.

Determined not to demonstrate just how aware he was of the dancer’s every movement, Franklin gave ferociously fake attention to his paper.

“Do you have any plans for today?” Ryland asked Cameron, as if he had no idea they weren’t all having a nice companionable breakfast.

Franklin made a point of keeping his attention on the paper, as if he didn’t care what the answer was going to be.

“I’m working tonight.”

“In that club?” Arslan asked, from the head of the table.

Franklin peeked over his newspaper. The older lion didn’t seem to like that idea at all. For once, that was something he and Franklin could agree on.

“There’s no need for you to keep working there,” Franklin cut in, before the leader of the pride could say anything else. Setting down his paper, he met Cameron’s eyes across the table. The dancer glowered at him in return.

“Oh?” Arslan asked.

Franklin ignored the elder shifter in favor of keeping his attention on Cameron. “You needn’t worry about money anymore.”

Cameron’s eyes narrowed. “Because you’ll pay my way?”

Franklin took another sip of his coffee. “Yes.”

“No,” Arslan snapped, before Franklin had even finished the damn syllable.

Cameron said nothing. He just stared, apparently not the least bit grateful for the offer.

Franklin held his gaze for as long as he could, trying to ignore how uncomfortable the attempt made him feel deep in a part of his psyche that he'd never explored before.

Finally, he had to give up. He quickly turned his attention to Arslan in an effort to cover his lapse. "That's not your decision," he informed the older lion.

"Cameron has no need of your money," Arslan shot back at him. "His pride will take care of him."

"You mean *you'll* pay his way?" Franklin asked. He looked Arslan up and down, letting his doubts show clearly in his eyes. "I'm sure Ryland will be thrilled at sharing you with another paid boy."

Arslan launched himself to his feet. His chair crashed back, toppling onto the floor behind him. The dining table shook as his hands thudded down on the well polished surface. The chinaware rattled.

Unless Franklin was very much mistaken, it was only Ryland's fingertips, placed gently on the lion's arm, that kept the leader of the pride from hurling himself across the room at him.

"I've got more sense than to take any notice of petty insults," the younger man said. Turning around, he glanced down the table at Franklin. "I know exactly what my master's interest in Cameron is."

Franklin took another sip of his coffee. Still sitting back in his chair, he gave everything he had to making it quite clear he wasn't going to be intimidated, not even if an uncomfortable feeling shivered its way down his spine every single bloody time he pushed forward. "So your...master rescues *all* the lost little lions, not just the pretty ones?" He set his cup back on the table.

"Franklin," Arslan warned. "Cameron is—"

"Cameron is still sitting here." The dancer rose to his feet as he said it, kicking back his own chair as he pushed his hair out of his eyes.

The room fell silent.

"I'm sorry," Ryland said eventually, with what sounded suspiciously like genuine regret in his voice. "Will you tell us what *you* want?"

"I've survived on my own, and paid my own way for years. What the hell makes all of you think I need either of you to look after me?" Cameron demanded.

"The pride would support any lion in our territory who needed our assistance while he looked for more suitable employment," Arslan said. He turned his glare on Franklin. "And *we* wouldn't expect anything in return."

Cameron made a disbelieving noise in the back of his throat.

Arslan straightened up, his annoyance seeming to turn into cold fury.

Franklin didn't miss how Cameron's lips twisted into a bitter smile when he noticed that.

"Oh, don't worry. I know you have no interest in screwing me, darling. But the pride never gives without expecting something in return, does it?" Cameron looked up toward the ceiling as if trawling back through his memories. "Let me see. Obedience. Respect for the rules of the pride. Living up to the standard expected of a pride," he sneered. "There's more than one way for a man to get screwed in exchange for a few quid."

Franklin smiled, thoroughly enjoying the older shifter's discomfort. Then, Cameron turned back to him, still as angry as ever.

"And there's a reason why I've always stuck to guys who paid by the hour." He looked Franklin up and down with no more respect than he'd offered Arslan. "I've no interest in letting some pathetic little punter think he owns me for any longer than it takes for him to zip up."

Franklin rose, putting him on the same level as the other two. Even as anger rushed through him, he knew in some deep part of himself where he didn't often explore, it came less from embarrassment over being spoken to that way by a damn rent boy, and far more from fear.

It sounded like the man actually intended to walk away from him. That obviously couldn't be allowed to happen. But, for the first time he could remember, Franklin wasn't sure if a large enough check would change the other man's mind. He'd never known a fear like it.

"I am nothing like the men who pushed a few notes into your hand in an alleyway," Franklin bit out. He was better than that. And maybe more importantly, he wasn't someone who Cameron was going to walk away from—not now, not ever.

"Because you can afford more than a few notes?" Cameron mocked.

Because I'll look after you for the rest of your life.

Franklin managed to stop the words escaping, but the very fact that they'd been there, right in the front of his mind, waiting to be said, was more than a little bit terrifying. He looked down for a moment and stared at the neatly laid breakfast table as he took a deep breath and tried to pull himself together.

“Because my intentions are different,” he finally settled on. “Do you really think I would have taken the time and trouble tracking you down if all I was interested in was some alleyway fumble?”

In the silence that followed, Franklin carefully studied his own words. They were...acceptable. A little bit of weakness had crept into the statement, but his true level of interest in Cameron hadn't been displayed. He still held a reasonably strong bargaining position. There was no way anyone else could have guessed that Cameron was the only man Franklin had ever met who really could name his own price.

“What are you interested in then?” Cameron demanded.

Franklin's attention went to Arslan and Ryland, studying the way the other men stood next to each other with casual intimacy, the lion watching over his lover, Ryland obviously happy to be owned.

A movement in the doorway drew his attention away from that scenario. Ellery and Kefir had arrived. Franklin's gaze fell on the collar around Kefir's neck. That was more like what he should be looking for with the dancer.

He turned back to Cameron. The lion must have seen where he'd been staring a moment before. A snarl built up at the back of his throat. Franklin did his best to picture his neck decorated by a collar. It wasn't as easy as he expected it to be.

Arslan seemed to realize then, that other members of his pride had arrived to share their breakfast. He waved a hand, welcoming them into the room. They barely had a chance to step through the doorway, before Cameron strode past them in the opposite direction. Ellery only just had time to catch hold of Kefir's shoulder and pull him back out of the other lion's way to stop him getting trampled.

Franklin's eyes tracked the dancer's progress until he was out of sight. The sound of light footfalls on the stairs floated through a moment later. Franklin remembered how to breathe. The lion hadn't left the house. Excusing himself from the breakfast table with as much dignity as he could muster, Franklin left the room.

As far as he was aware, everyone who lived at the den, and a few more besides, were already downstairs. The only lion he could stumble upon by opening all the doors on the upper floor and glaring into each room in turn, was Cameron. He started with the first door on his right as he reached the top of the stairs.

* * * *

A footstep on the creaky floorboard outside his bedroom door made Cameron tense. The door handle rattled. The heavy mahogany panel swung inward.

It was so easy for him to picture Arslan's oversized frame filling the door. *You will act in the way your pride expects, or you will accept the consequences. You'll show due respect to the leader of your pride if you wish to remain with us.*

He remembered hearing the words so clearly, echoing through his mind, reaching out to him over the years since he'd left his last pride.

Well screw that!

As Cameron's pacing took him to the wall on the far side of the bedroom, he spun around, more than ready to give the older lion a piece of his mind.

He stopped short when he saw Franklin there. His eyes narrowed as the human stepped into the room and shut the door firmly behind him.

"I'm not offering you a night in an alley," Franklin said, as he met Cameron's gaze. "I'm offering you the chance to make sure you'd never have to work an alleyway again."

"To be your private whore until you get bored?" Cameron spat.

"To be looked after by—"

That was all he managed to say before Cameron reached him. The human's back hit the door. "By someone who wants to screw me?" Cameron hissed into Franklin's ear as he pinned him against the woodwork.

"Yes."

At least he had the balls not to try to lie about it. That was something.

Cameron half snarled as he fought against his own desire for the man and the temptation to give into it, just once. He'd let enough men screw him for money, would it really be so bad to let one more screw him thinking that was all he was interested in—

"No!" The word escaped from Cameron's lips before his brain had a chance to catch up. It came from somewhere far deeper, more instinctive than any thought process. This man was far more important than any of the others could ever have been.

Franklin wriggled against the wall, tugging impatiently against Cameron's hold on him, but a human—even one who had obviously spent a long time in the gym honing his muscles, was no match for a lion's natural strength.

Easily keeping him against the door, Cameron stared down at him. They were pressed tightly together from shoulder to knee. He could feel every line of the other man's body moving

against him as he wriggled. Even after he stilled, every time either of them took a breath they rubbed together beautifully.

"Mine." The word was half lost in a snarl, but Cameron couldn't have kept it back if his life had depended on it.

Franklin glared up at him as if he'd taken leave of his senses.

"I said I have no interest in letting *you* screw *me*," Cameron informed him. "I didn't say I have no intention of screwing you."

The older man pushed irritably at Cameron's hands, but, even for a human, the movements felt weak and halfhearted. It might not have been what he'd had in mind when he'd reached for his wallet, but Franklin's cock didn't seem to mind the change in plan at all. The human's erection pressed as enthusiastically against Cameron's leg as ever.

Cameron smiled "Do you like that idea, sweetheart?" he asked, in his very best purr.

"What the hell do you—?"

Grabbing Franklin's arm, Cameron spun him around and pushed his chest against the woodwork. One of his hands took hold of the back of the smaller man's neck, pressing his cheek against the door as he held him there with his whole body. His crotch pressed hard against the older man's arse, letting Franklin know that he wasn't the only one who was up and ready to play.

"I won't let you screw me," Cameron informed the other man. "Not even for a blank check." He slid his other hand down between them and palmed the smaller man's arse. "But I'll screw you—for free."

Franklin pushed back against him. His buttocks rubbed against Cameron's fly, and the lion doubted that even Franklin knew if he was trying to push him away or encourage him on.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Cameron whispered to him.

A frustrated noise escaped from the back of Franklin's throat, but he bit back any words that tried to leave his mouth along with it.

Smiling to himself, Cameron rocked his hips, rubbing his erection against Franklin's arse in offering. "Last chance, darling. Lions don't screw unwilling men."

"Yes."

"Yes?" Cameron pushed.

"Yes, I'd like that," Franklin bit out.

Cameron snarled his pleasure as he jerked Franklin away from the door and dragged him unceremoniously across the room. One push had him sprawled face down on the bed.

A second passed. Cameron watched the other man scramble to push himself up onto his hands and knees, much the same way a much smaller breed of cat might toy with a mouse.

When Franklin tried to straighten up, Cameron stepped forward and put his hand on his back, refusing him permission to rise any higher.

Franklin glanced over his shoulder at him. He didn't appear altogether unenthusiastic about his position, but he certainly looked as confused as hell about how he ended up there.

Cameron's claws immediately fought to be freed from his human form.

The guy probably had no idea what it was like to hit the sheets with a guy who wasn't so in awe of his checkbook he'd do anything and everything Franklin wanted him to, without a single word of complaint.

Well, it was time he learned—time all the guys who turned up in the clubs to watch other men dance, and pay them for more than their stage skills, learned better than to treat someone like that.

Anger raced through Cameron hard and fast, as memories threatened to overtake him. He shoved Franklin forward. Cameron's claws refused to retract as he remembered all the times he'd been pushed around that way. The sound of tearing fabric filled the air as Franklin's shirt tore under his touch.

The human fell flat against the mattress once more. "What the hell—?"

Before Franklin had time to say another word, Cameron was on the bed with him, covering the smaller man's prone body with his own and pinning him down against the blankets. "Problem?" he snarled.

Franklin's back arched as he seemed to instinctively try to press his backside back against Cameron's crotch.

"My shirt—"

"If you want me, you'll take me, and my manners, and my claws, all as you find them," Cameron bit out. "How important is your shirt to you?"

Franklin remained completely motionless, his head turned to one side, his cheek resting on the blanket, as he seemed to think that question through very carefully. That was the businessman in him. They were always the same, working out the angles, trying to decide what their next move should be, how they could best screw the entire world out of every penny it had, just so they could use that money to buy rent boys by the hour.

A roar built in the back of Cameron's throat as he stared down at the other man's profile.

Franklin's eyes fell closed.

Cameron stopped short. No roar hit the air.

The look on the human's face, his scent, the way his body moved against his, everything about the man beneath him called to more than Cameron's anger with the world. As much as he wanted to cling to his fury, another part of him wanted nothing more than to reach out, slide his fingers past the torn shirt and stroke the skin he'd bared with his claws. Something inside him was desperate to praise the way the older man leaned into his feline master's touch and—

Cameron shook his head, trying to toss aside ideas that made no sense, that had no place in the world as he'd learned it really was.

"Please?"

Franklin's eyes blinked open, but he didn't try to look up from the bedspread.

If the other man could have kept the word back he would have—Cameron had never been more certain of anything in his life. But the submission in the rasped syllable was unmistakable.

Straightening up, Cameron kept his knees on either side of Franklin's prone body, pinning him down with his weight as he knelt over the other man's legs. From that position, the businessman's upper body was completely accessible, to be treated as he pleased.

Within seconds, Cameron had laid waste to the rest of Franklin's shirt. The few tattered remnants of cotton did little to hide any of the skin it had been intended to cover.

The human's body was all flawlessly tanned skin, and gym honed lines of muscle. Cameron ran his fingertips across his back. The only thing he'd torn was the shirt, the flesh beneath it was unmarked, unharmed.

The older man's hands moved to rest, palms down, on the bed to either side of him. He pushed slightly as if trying to press himself up from the mattress and into his lover's caressing hand.

Cameron studied him carefully. It had been so long since he'd been with a man and known himself to be anything other than a whore, he'd almost forgotten how to act when he was with a man he felt something other than complete hatred for.

But, against all logic, in that moment, he didn't hate Franklin. Cameron traced his hands further down the other man's spine until they reached the human's belt. Forcing his claws to retain the shape of harmless human nails, he reached beneath the business man and undid the belt buckle. Quickly pulling down his fly, he tugged the other man's trousers down past his buttocks.

Scrambling to push the material past where he knelt over him. Franklin didn't even try to stop him.

When Cameron retreated far enough to snatch the lube from the bedside table, the older man cautiously raised himself up onto his hands and knees once more. There was just a touch of hesitation to his movement, a hint of vulnerability, as if he wasn't used to playing either the submissive role, or used to bottoming for another man either.

Somehow, Cameron found himself reaching out and stroking his hand down the human's spine once more, trying to reassure his soon to be lover as he flicked the top off the lube with his other hand.

That kind of gentleness didn't come easily to him anymore. His claws left pale, red lines in their wake as they crept out and slid down Franklin's back. They weren't deep marks, hell they weren't even real scratches, but they still raised a wave of bitterness in the lion.

Anger at his own lack of self control flooded him, and with it came a cold fury at the whole world. Why the hell should he be careful with him, when Franklin was the exact same kind of man as the guys who'd treated him like dirt every time they reached for their wallet?

Slicking his fingers he slid them roughly between Franklin's buttocks. The older man gasped as he thrust the first digit inside him. Cameron stilled as he saw the human tense. Instincts warred within him, leaving him trapped between a desire to be tender, and another to prove that this time *he* was the one who could do whatever the hell he wanted with his lover.

Frowning, the lion slid his finger further into the other man's hole, spreading the lube deeper as he moved the digit back and forth before quickly adding another. Franklin rocked back slightly, pushing himself back against Cameron's fingers as he seemed to quickly adjust to the intrusion of two, then three fingers.

Snatching his hand away Cameron scrabbled at his fly as he rose onto his knees behind Franklin. Slicking his shaft with extra lube, he pressed the tip of his cock against the human's hole and thrust into him, burying his erection deep inside his lover's arse in one perfect movement.

Franklin bucked and jerked. Cameron frowned down at the back of the other man's head. It was impossible to tell if he was trying to pull away from him or push his hole back even more firmly around his lover's cock.

Franklin looked over his shoulder. Their eyes met.

"Just...give me a moment?" he asked, his voice very controlled, and his body shaking with the effort of controlling it.

Cameron hesitated.

Franklin bowed his head down toward the mattress as he took another deep breath. "It's been a while since I..."

Cameron didn't need the other man to finish the sentence.

It had been a long time since he'd let another man top him.

Pleasure rushed through Cameron at the knowledge, but with it came a wave of purely irrational jealousy. He didn't care about how long ago it might have been that another lover had Franklin in that same position, on his hands and knees while a more dominant lover pounded into him again and again.

No other man should ever have laid a hand, much less any other part of their body, on his pet. Cameron's instincts screamed at him to move, to thrust deeper inside Franklin, to mark his territory. It took every ounce of self control he had to stay still and give the smaller man the time he'd asked for.

Humans obviously couldn't relax and accept another man inside them as easily as a lion could. Or maybe Franklin just hadn't had as much practice as he'd had at getting screwed by complete bastards...

Cameron pushed the thought away as hard as he could. His hair fell forward into his eyes as he stared down at Franklin. Lifting a hand, he pushed it away, not wanting to miss a single detail of the other man's expression.

Franklin's head dropped forward until his forehead almost rested on the blanket beneath him. Cameron reached out and put his hand on the older man's shoulder, half steadying him and reassuring him, half making sure he bloody well stayed where he was and didn't try to run away from him.

Franklin's body shuddered as he gasped for breath, but he didn't even try to escape. Silent seconds passed. Franklin's knees shuffled against the bedspread. Cameron felt the other man's muscles tense and relax around his shaft as Franklin's body struggled to accept him.

Cameron fought even harder to stay still, as his hips begged him for permission to rock back and thrust forward. His grip tightened on Franklin's shoulder and there was nothing he could do to stop it, all he could do, was try to keep his claws to himself.

Finally, just when Cameron was sure he'd lose his mind if he tried to remain frozen in place for just one second longer, he felt a change in the other man. Franklin seemed to relax. His scent changed. Pleasure appeared to overtake discomfort within the older man. He moved, and

this time, there was no doubting that he was pushing back against Cameron with blatant enthusiasm.

A whimper escaped from the human, as if he was desperately trying to keep back any words that might reveal how much he wanted Cameron to move, but wasn't quite strong enough to repress that needy little sound, as well.

Cameron rocked back and thrust into the other man's arse to the hilt. Franklin's grip on the blanket beneath him turned white-knuckled. Cameron forced himself to still again as he scowled down at the other man, frantically trying to read his body language and work out how to please him.

It wasn't supposed to be that way. Cameron knew that. He wasn't supposed to care. He was supposed to hate Franklin and everything the man stood for. Every logical thought in Cameron's head told him that was the way things should be, how they always were between men.

If the other guy got hurt then it was his own fault and...

And as Cameron stared down at the back of the other man's head, he slowly lost any desire to punish him, for what he'd done, or for what guys like him had done so many times over the last three years.

In that moment, what Cameron wanted, more than anything, was for Franklin to love... The lion closed his eyes for a moment. He wanted Franklin to love what they did together. He wanted the human to love the way their bodies moved against each other. Yes, Cameron told himself, very firmly, *that* was what he wanted Franklin to love.

Swallowing down any stupid and all too revealing words before they could escape from his lips, Cameron pulled back, only to thrust forward more carefully. Leaning forward and echoing the shape of his lover's body, he let a little of his weight rest against the other man's skin as he brought them closer together. Letting his chest move against Franklin's back with every motion, he plowed into him again, each thrust slow, deep and far more heartfelt than it should ever be for a back alley rent boy.

Franklin murmured his pleasure as he arched against him. He gasped as Cameron found the perfect angle and hit it again and again, with complete control and precision. Each sign of the other man's pleasure rushed through Cameron's veins, mingling with his own and heading straight for his cock.

For once, he didn't add any of his own moans of enjoyment to the mix. He wasn't putting on a show. There wasn't anyone he was trying to impress. Enthusiasm wouldn't earn him a better tip that day.

Holding Franklin tighter, Cameron covered the smaller man's body more securely with his own as he rocked his hips once more.

Reaching underneath the other man as he felt the frustration build toward a tipping point inside him, he wrapped his hand around Franklin's cock. The human was still gloriously hard in spite of their faltering start.

Pre-cum leaked onto Cameron's palm, slicking his grip as he stroked him. Even while he tried to be careful, it was impossible to make his actions a polite request that the guy hurry up and come.

His touch was pure demand, and Cameron purred his pleasure as Franklin bucked beneath him and quickly obeyed his feline master. The soft little sound turned into a roar as he tumbled into his own climax after him.

For just a few moments, all the anger and confusion Cameron had ever felt ceased to exist. Pure bliss rushed through him, and there was just him and Franklin, with no past or future to worry about, with no payment to be taken.

There was no money, there were no other men. Cameron allowed all his familiar points of reference to slip away and let the moment pick him up and take him somewhere peaceful and safe.

He stayed there for as long as he could, until he couldn't put off the return to reality for another second. Finally, he blinked his eyes open. Franklin was panting and trying to catch his breath, still trapped beneath Cameron's body. He'd fallen forward and pinned the older man to the bed as they came, as if he thought his lover might try to escape while afterglow still lingered inside them both.

With his brain still not working in quite the way he was used to, Cameron stroked his fingers through the human's hair and down over his neck to caress his back. His tongue flickered out and lapped at Franklin's bare shoulder. Finally, one brain cell hit into another and told him to stop being such a bloody idiot—to get the hell out of there.

Springing up from the bed, Cameron stumbled back several paces. His fly was undone, his jeans bunched around his thighs. He pulled up the denim and drew up his zipper as he rushed out of the room.

As he took one last glance back, he saw Franklin look over his shoulder at him. He glimpsed the doubt and the hurt in the other man's eyes, but he couldn't worry about that. He had enough problems of his own.

Principal amongst them was the realization that he may well have found the man he was destined to be mated to, only to realize he was the last kind of man on the planet he'd ever want to be bound to for the rest of his life.

Chapter Four

"Do you intend to make Franklin your mate?"

Cameron jerked his attention away from where he'd been staring blankly into the fireplace for at least the last hour. He seemed to have been spending far too much time doing that over the last few days. "What?"

"I said, are you and Franklin going to be mates?" the other lion repeated.

Cameron glared at him in silence for several long moments. When he looked away from Blaine, Cameron realized that all the other men present were also looking in his direction, waiting to hear his answer.

"You have to give them time," a quiet voice advised from the far side of the room. Kefir smiled across at Cameron as their eyes met. "Important decisions take time. There's no rush."

"I can speak for myself," Cameron snapped, turning his attention back to the fire. Silence descended. He was damned if he knew what to say. He and Franklin were... Franklin was... "I've no interest in being any rich man's whore," he snarled at the world in general.

His grip tightened around the coffee cup one of the other lions had pushed into his hand at some point that afternoon. He had no idea how long he'd been holding it. He lifted it to his lips and found the liquid disgustingly cold. It was all he could do to stop himself from throwing the damn thing into the hearth.

With very forced calm, Cameron set it down on the coffee table next to him, he even managed to put it neatly on the coaster.

"Is that what Franklin wants?" somebody asked, his tone more than a little wary, as if he was talking to a man standing on a high ledge, or perhaps a man with his finger on a detonator.

Cameron didn't bother to look up and find out who it was. Almost all the lions were exactly the same. They might have been older than his own twenty-two years, but they were still just silly little boys who *thought* they knew what humans were like.

They didn't have a clue. Their lives were all safety and security—all tea and coasters. The kind of places Cameron was used to, didn't serve anything that wasn't cheap, watered down alcohol, and a few water marks from the bottom of a glass were the least of the stains they got on their tables.

"It's what all men like him want," Cameron bit out.

"Men like him?" That was Kefir's gentle tone again.

Rich men—the kind of men who were happy to visit the kinds of clubs he'd danced in, and buy whatever and whoever caught their eye. The kind of men who went back to their rich wives, or maybe even their rich husbands, but who never stayed around with the whores and dregs once they'd had their bit of rough.

Somehow those weren't the words that left his lips. "Humans," he muttered. "Humans are all the same."

"I think you'll find you know far less about the width and breadth of human society than you think you do. There's more to humanity than the fools you danced for."

The deep, serious voice pulled Cameron's attention away from his study of the blaze once more. He met Ellery's gaze and held it with feline ease, but the human still gave no sign of wanting to lower his eyes when challenged by a lion.

"I'm not the kind of lion that would wear a human's collar," Cameron spat.

Ellery didn't like that at all. Cameron saw the way he tensed. He saw the way Kefir's hand stroked along his arm, silently trying to pacify him, too.

He'd watched so many dancers in the clubs fawn over rich bastards in almost exactly the same way, and it turned his stomach to see another lion have to act like that.

"We don't wear collars," Luther said.

Cameron glanced at the sofa where he and Blaine were curled up around Marrick. They were little more than cubs, playing with a new toy—all three of them. They didn't really have any idea how things were, how careful a lion had to be when—

Whatever he might have said to the trio died on his lips as Cameron became aware of a change in the house. It was the same change that came over a club whenever Franklin arrived in it. He turned to face the door a moment before it swung open.

Franklin stood in the threshold of the den, a briefcase in one hand, a suit bag and an up-market shopping bag in the other. "Hello."

Cameron ran his eyes over the other man, drinking in every single detail of him. The sight of Franklin rushed to his cock the same way it always had, but Cameron had to bite back a curse as he realized he was also checking to make sure the other man was okay after being away from his side for most of the day.

The world felt like a slightly better place now that Cameron knew he was home safe again. Pointedly turning away from Franklin to stare into the fire once more, Cameron dramatically increased the speed of the curses scrolling through his mind.

Waiting for his master to come back to him like a damn kitten! So bloody pathetic...

"Cameron?"

Lifting his gaze, Cameron glared at Franklin as if he was the very last person he wanted to see. His lover stared back, as if he actually thought he'd win that kind of game.

To hell with that! It was about time the man learned he'd never win a staring contest with a feline.

Finally, the human dropped his gaze. "Would you like to eat out tonight?"

Cameron blinked. That was...not what he expected. He found himself rising to his feet and approaching the other man as if Franklin was a curiosity that needed to be investigated further.

"Out?"

Franklin smiled slightly. "I'm meeting some of the men I'm doing business with for dinner. I thought you might like to join us."

The other lions were still watching them. If Franklin didn't see how stupid that idea was, Cameron was sure they all did.

Striding out of the room without a word, Cameron quickly made his way up the stairs. He'd already thrown himself onto the bed and was leaning idly back against the headboard when Franklin followed him in, weighed down by all his baggage.

"You didn't say if you'd be joining me," he said, with what sounded like very strained politeness.

"Depends," Cameron said. "What are they into?"

Franklin paused halfway through hanging the suit bag on the front of the wardrobe. He turned back to him. "What?"

Cameron let his lips twitch into a smile, as if there was anything he could find even remotely funny about the situation. “Are they kinky—that usually costs extra, you know?”

Franklin’s jaw clenched. Cameron could see his pulse flutter more rapidly beneath his skin as he seemed to struggle against his temper.

For several seconds the human was silent. Finally he seemed to find his voice. “I invited you to dinner, not to...”

“Not to whore myself out to make damn well sure you get the deal?” Cameron finished for him. “You wouldn’t be the first man to want to do that. Corporate hospitality, isn’t that what they call it?”

Franklin’s free hand clenched into a fist at his side as he hung up his suit bag. “We need to set some ground rules.”

“Oh?” Cameron arched his back, casually displaying his body for the other man’s appreciation as he made himself a little more comfortable on the bed and simultaneously made it clear he was already thoroughly bored with that topic.

Franklin’s eyes lingered on the movement, as if he was helpless to look away. Still, once he’d cleared his throat, he pushed forward with the same bloody stupid topic.

“If we are to have some sort of arrangement with each other, I’ll expect you to refrain from...” He didn’t seem entirely sure what the most suitable term would be. “Dating other men,” he finally finished.

“Unless it’s in your business’ best interests?” Cameron sneered.

“I’m quite capable of taking care of my business interests without pimping out my lovers,” the older man snapped.

“So what, I just lie naked in your bed every day waiting for the big important business man to come home?” Cameron jeered, as confusion and uncertainty swirled inside him, faster than ever. “Thanks sweetheart, but I’ll decide who I do and don’t screw. I’m no Kefir to be kept collared by any human master.” Contempt filled every word—Cameron made sure of that.

If Franklin’s jaw tensed any further he was going to break his teeth.

While part of him writhed with anger, Cameron found another side of himself watching the other man’s actions with interest, wondering how much it would take to make him lose control, wondering what would happen when he did.

“I don’t have time for this,” Franklin ground out. “Are you joining us for dinner or not?”

“Sure,” Cameron sneered. “What shall I wear, the jeans from the club or those leather shorts from the first time you saw me dance?”

Franklin stormed over to the wardrobe and snatched the suit bag from where it hung on the door. Picking up the shopping bag on the way past, he tossed both on the bed in front of Cameron.

“Payment for services you hope I’ll render after I take it off?” Cameron snapped.

“No.”

“What then?” Cameron demanded.

“A choice.”

“What?”

“I wanted you to have the choice,” Franklin threw at him. “I wanted you to have something suitable to wear, so you could choose to go out to dinner with me if you wanted to, and not have to worry if you’d be able to fit in.”

The older man turned away from him and strode into the bathroom without another word. A moment later, Cameron heard the shower start. The sound wasn’t followed by any sort of invitation from Franklin, for his feline lover to join him in there.

Left alone in the bedroom, Cameron reached out and undid the zip down the front of the suit bag without really thinking about what he was doing.

It must have cost a fortune. As he took the suit out of the bag, it damn near oozed quality. Cameron ran his fingertips down the jacket’s lapel.

He snatched his hand away then, before his claws could ruin it. It was a good suit—the kind of thing a wealthy man might buy for himself. It couldn’t have been further from the kind of clothes he’d worn in the clubs.

As he stared down at it, more and more confusion poured into Cameron’s veins. It didn’t look like the kind of suit a man would buy his whore. He took it out of the bag very carefully and laid it out neatly on the bed. A pair of good shoes were soon unearthed from the shopping bag. A shirt followed, then a tie. Cufflinks were discovered beneath them, there was even a pair of boxer briefs in there.

Franklin certainly seemed to have thought of everything...

Cameron stood up. He took several steps away from both the bed and the clothing laid out there.

Standing in the middle of the room he stilled. His attention went to the en-suite door, then back to the clothes. He took a deep breath.

The chances of a man like Franklin seeing him as anything other than a whore were miniscule. But if there was *any* chance...

The same instinct that had drawn him to the other man from the very first time he sensed his presence in the crowded club screamed inside him, demanding that if there was even the remotest possibility, he had to take it.

Cameron took half a step toward the clothes. He closed his eyes for a moment. His stomach knotted around his doubts.

Forcing his eyes open, Cameron squared his shoulders and took several brisk paces forward in quick succession. A stripper shouldn't have any trouble getting into or out of any outfit. That knowledge did him very little good right then. All his carefully honed skills deserted him. He mentally cursed his fingers for refusing to work quickly enough.

He glanced at the door leading into the en-suite once more, sure that it would swing open any moment, that Franklin would stride back into the room and catch him scrambling into the clothes with shaking hands.

By the time he was finally dressed and ready to stare into the mirror on the dressing table Cameron was out of breath and more uncertain than ever. He had to force himself to stand up straight, tilt his chin back and meet his own gaze without flinching.

Lowering his eyes then, he ran his attention over the suit. He...didn't look like a whore in it. That was something. Swallowing down the bitter taste in the back of his mouth, Cameron lifted a hand and thrust it through his hair, impatiently pushing the long blond strands back off his face.

For a moment he hesitated again, but when he made his decision, he moved quickly. A few quick strides took him to his back pack. In moments, his hair was cinched neatly back at the nape of his neck with a leather cord.

Cameron looked in the mirror again as he smoothed a few errant strands into place. A little less wild looking, perhaps a little more like the kind of man who belonged at a table with Franklin and the kind of men he'd be likely to do business with.

The sound of the shower stopped. Cameron glanced toward the bathroom door. Taking a step back he sat on the end of the bed to wait.

A few seconds passed. The lion got to his feet. Striding to the end of the room, he spun around and retraced his steps. He pushed his hands into his pockets. A moment later, he took them out and straightened his jacket. He looked to the en-suite door again. The guy was taking forever in there.

Cameron paced back to the end of the bed, but he couldn't bring himself to sit down again. At this rate, he was bound to make a fool of himself when Franklin finally appeared.

The lion frowned then. He didn't have to wait for the guy. He wasn't being paid for his time. There was no reason for him to twiddle his fingers there as if he had no choice. Turning away from the en-suite, Cameron strode to the bedroom door and briskly out onto the landing. A moment later he was at the bottom of the stairs, standing in the middle of the hallway without a clue as to what his next move should be.

Taking a deep breath, he glanced around to make sure no one had seen him make a fool of himself as he rushed down the stairs. No one was there. Walking across the tiles, he leaned casually back against the dresser on the far side of the hall and did his best to look as if he were bored as hell, and not the least bit nervous.

Within moments, Cameron knew without the slightest doubt that the tick from the hall clock was the most annoying sound on the planet. His hand curled into a fist as he barely managed to resist the temptation to smash it.

"Some humans can be complete bastards."

Cameron spun around.

Ellery stepped out of the doorway leading into the den. "I've no doubt you've got good reason to hate humans, Cameron. And if you want to bitch and snap at me like a brat, I really don't give a damn." He stopped for a moment, as if waiting for that to sink in. "But, the cheap shots you're taking at Kefir—they stop now. Lashing out at *him* is unacceptable."

"I'm not scared of you." Cameron let a well practiced sneer fill his voice.

Ellery stepped forward. He didn't look scared of facing off against a lion, either. The other man stared him down as if he thought he was just a silly little cub, just like Luther or Blaine.

"Mind your manners with Kefir and we'll get on fine." Ellery stepped past him without another word.

"And does he have to mind his manners with you, for him to be fine too?" Cameron called after him.

"I'm not renting him by the hour, Cameron," Ellery said, with something that sounded suspiciously like pity in his voice. "I've taken him under my protection. Until you learn the difference between the two scenarios, I suggest you don't babble about things you don't understand."

The older man walked away, slow and sure of every step he took. It felt far more like he was dismissing him than running away from the scary shape shifter.

Cameron had no idea how long he glared after the other man and listened to the tick of that bloody clock. It felt like an eternity. He had the horrible suspicion that any time he spent away from Franklin was going to feel that way now.

"Cameron?"

Spinning around, Cameron glared up the stairs at Franklin. Finally!

He'd changed into a different suit from the one he'd worn to work. Cameron ran his eyes over him, not entirely sure if he wanted to rip the garments off Franklin's body because it obviously cost more than he could have earned on a dozen trips to the alleyway behind the club, or just for the sheer joy of having him naked.

Franklin strode down the stairs as calmly and as assertively as he could. Projecting confidence was one thing. Feeling it was something else. His heart raced so fast, he could easily imagine that it would leave him behind and race toward the shifter ahead of him.

"You look great," he told the younger man as he reached his side.

Cameron merely glared at him.

The lion's anger should have contorted his features into something short of perfection. Somehow it just made his cheekbones appear even higher, his dark brown eyes even deeper and every single damn thing about him that little bit more glorious than before.

"I'm glad you decided to join me," Franklin offered, in his best business voice.

Not a single word.

Taking a deep breath and trying to ignore the fact he was already tenting his nicely tailored trousers, Franklin politely opened the door for his date and let Cameron lead the way to the car.

"The men we're meeting are selling their business. I'm buying it from them," he said, as he started the car and drove out of the drive.

Cameron stared out of the car window and made no comment.

"It's a blue chip company—they make computer software," he added.

Not a single, bloody word.

The appropriate thing to do at that point would be to shut the hell up. If the lion was going to sulk and pout like a spoiled child, it was obvious that he should call him to heel rather than pander to him. But something inside Franklin screamed that all he wanted was the other man to be happy, to be pleased with him and he still couldn't quite convince his mouth and his lips to obey his orders.

He literally bit his tongue, but even that didn't do any good.

"The older man's name is Charles Hansford. The younger man we meet will be Bill Edwards." Franklin tapped his fingertips on the steering wheel. "Bill and I are old friends. We went to school together."

Five minutes later, Franklin had never been more grateful to see a restaurant come into view. He rushed out of the car before the valet had a chance to open the door for him, incredibly glad to be out of the stifling silence within the vehicle. He was easily in time to see Cameron rise out of the opposite side of the low slung space with perfect feline grace.

As the most fashionable new restaurant in the best part of the city, there was the inevitable genteel scrum around the doorway as everyone who'd managed to get a reservation there lingered in an effort to be seen arriving or departing.

Just as he was about to look over his shoulder and check on the lion's progress through the melee, sure the lion would find the crowds unsettling, Franklin felt Cameron's hand come to rest on the small of his back. The taller man stepped closer to him and seemed to try to shelter him from the worst of the crowd with his larger frame.

Franklin hesitated as he found his usual role snatched away from him. Cameron took a step forward. Their bodies rubbed together.

As Franklin finally convinced himself to walk on and break physical contact with the lion, he silently shook his head at himself. Anyone would swear he was a teenager at his first school dance rather than a grown man. Worse than that, he had the horrible feeling that he was playing the teenage girl in that particular scenario, the follower rather than the leader, the submissive rather than the dominant party.

That couldn't be allowed to happen. Gay or straight, a man had to be a man. And a successful business man had to have the whole world by the balls if he wanted to stay on the top of the heap. He'd learned that damn near his first day on the job.

Franklin marched forward until the crowd thinned out. As they made it past the maître d', there was finally room to breathe. Somehow, Cameron still remained as close to his side as ever, as if he was watching over him in a way that really wasn't necessary.

As much as he tried to hate it, to loathe the weakness it implied the lion saw in him, and detest the idea that he wasn't the one in complete control of the whole world, the only emotion that rose up inside him was a warm, content little feeling. That sort of silly response had no place in a businessman's world.

"Franklin!"

A wave from the other side of the room summoned Franklin's attention. Raising a hand in acknowledgment, he led Cameron over to meet their dinner companions with every scrap of confidence he could muster.

The silent treatment Cameron seemed to be favoring him with, regardless of his simultaneously fussing over him like a helpless little child, continued right up to the moment Cameron shook hands with Bill and Charles.

All the lion did then, was say all the appropriate things a man should say when introduced to a stranger. It was stupid for Franklin to feel jealous of them for being able to get two words out of his date when he'd failed to get one sodding syllable from the man since he'd changed into his new suit.

Logic was no match for the emotions Franklin was finding increasingly impossible to ignore ever since he'd finally tracked Cameron down. His smile was even more strained by the time they were shown to their table. It wasn't as easy as it should have been to push everything out of his mind and concentrate on charming the guys he wanted to do business with. Even when he slipped back into silent mode, Cameron was still there, right by his side. He was still as gorgeous and as distracting as hell.

As they ate their starters and Franklin drew the other men out and encouraged them to show off their most successful deals. Cameron merely leaned back in his chair and observed each of the men opposite them in turn, but the other men still lapped up his attention. And Cameron never once turned his gaze to Franklin himself.

Shifting slightly uncomfortably in his seat, Franklin tried, and completely failed, not to resent that. It was stupid to imagine that they were looking at the shifter as anything other than someone they could impress and show off to. They were both married to completely stunning women. They were not trying to steal his bloody boyfriend.

Franklin's hand still insisted upon curling into a fist below the table. By the time they'd worked their way through the main course and Cameron politely excused himself to the gents, Franklin wasn't just regretting inviting him to dine with them, he was lamenting being there himself, wishing he hadn't even bothered to eat that day.

As Charles excused himself from the table a moment later, with a wave of his cigarette packet, Franklin could barely convince himself to stay at the table rather than rush off after Cameron. Minutes ticked by and the long, convoluted story Bill was telling him failed to hold his attention for a single second.

Franklin began to wonder if there was a way to check his watch without Bill noticing. No. Franklin forced himself to think logically, at least for a few seconds.

The lion hadn't walked out on him. There was no reason to think that he had. Anyway, Charles was still outside smoking. He'd left the table just a minute after Cameron, so the shifter couldn't have been away from his side for that long. Charles wouldn't have lingered any longer in the cold evening air than his cigarette required.

He was obviously overreacting. Franklin stayed in his seat and kept his polite smile pinned to his lips as he nodded to whatever Bill was saying, on general principle. Franklin wanted to buy his business. No doubt he should be agreeing with him.

In spite of everything, Franklin was barely two seconds away from getting out of his seat and heading for the gents in search of his lover, when he finally saw Cameron making his way back to the table.

Leaning toward him as the shifter slid gracefully back into his seat, Franklin felt a strand of hair that had escaped from the other man's ponytail caress his cheek. He tried not to like that.

"Is it too much to ask for a little bit of small talk?" he hissed in the other man's ear, before he could give into the temptation to lean in further and kiss the lion's neck the way he really wanted to.

The shifter glared at him as he pulled jerkily away, as if offended by having Franklin within several miles of him.

Franklin took a deep breath and let it out very slowly. He was not going to make a scene. He was going to be sensible and logical. He was going to think like a businessman who had his eye fixed firmly on the bottom line and not on his boyfriend's arse.

"I'm not having dinner with them for the fun of it," Franklin bit out, struggling to keep the words under his breath. "This is an important deal. I'm working here."

Cameron muttered something unintelligible, but he pulled even further away from Franklin before he had a chance to challenge him on it and demand he repeat it.

This was an important deal. He'd put a lot of time and effort into it. He cared about it. He shouldn't have to remind himself that he was capable of caring about things other than Cameron.

"So," Bill cleared his throat. "What line of business are you in, Cameron?"

Just then, Charles came back to his seat. His cigarette seemed to have improved his mood as dramatically as Cameron's visit to the gents had ruined the lion's. "Yes, I was wondering that too," the older man said.

"Cameron is—" Franklin began, smoothly.

"A dancer," the lion cut in.

"Oh..."

Franklin was vaguely aware of Bill smiling politely as his own expression congealed.

"Ballet, or modern or—" Bill began.

"I'm the kind of dancer that earns far more in the alley behind the club than he does on the stage," Cameron said.

Each word was enunciated perfectly clearly. Franklin didn't need to demand the lion repeat them, they already echoed around and around in his brain loudly enough as it was.

"You..." Apparently that was all Bill could think of to say.

Still, Franklin had to give credit where it was due. It was one word more than he'd been able to come up with himself.

"I'm a stripper?" Cameron filled in for him. "A lap dancer?" Leaning back in his seat, he looked as comfortable there as he had in the changing room at the back of the club a few days before. "A rent boy?" he went on. "A whore? Yeah, all of the above."

No one said anything.

"Let's not be coy, gentlemen," he said, rolling his shoulders and slouching just a little more elegantly in his seat. "We all know exactly what I am."

He looked at each of the men sitting opposite him.

Bill shifted somewhat uncomfortably in his chair.

Charles looked as if he was going to have a fit any second. Franklin had never seen the older man look so furious. Charles wasn't the one who had every right to be furious with Cameron's behavior!

Finally, Cameron turned his attention to Franklin. The anger in his expression damn near took Franklin's breath away. Confusion rushed through him, wondering what he ever could have done to make the other man hate him that much.

Hot on its heels came a red hot fury of his own. As their eyes remained locked, Franklin pulled himself to his feet and took hold of Cameron's arm. The lion stayed in his chair for an agonizingly long moment.

It almost seemed as if Franklin might actually have to physically drag him out of the restaurant. But, finally, the lion gave in. Cameron pulled himself to his feet to loom over Franklin. Striding out of the building, Franklin snatched the keys off the valet and slammed the car door behind him as he got behind the wheel. It did nothing to alleviate his anger.

Cameron slid into the passenger side without needing to be prompted. The lion actually seemed about to quit with the silent treatment but speak, but Franklin couldn't listen to it right then.

"Don't say a word."

For once, Cameron actually obeyed an order Franklin gave him.

Chapter Five

Cameron's expensive new shoes crunched against the gravel in the drive as he strode up to Arslan's front door. Franklin was just a step behind him all the way. Even with red hot fury racing through his blood, Cameron couldn't help but be acutely aware of the other man's presence, of his scent, of every single bloody detail of him.

Franklin smelled angry too—as if *he* had something to be mad about. As if Cameron had let him down. Pushing aside the bitter taste that idea left in the back of his mouth, Cameron stormed toward the stairs.

As the lion's foot landed on the first tread, Franklin rushed forward. His hand wrapped around Cameron's arm. He pulled him back, trying to drag him in the direction of the nearest door.

If there'd been any way in hell Cameron could have believed that any human could ever be strong enough to drag a lion in any direction in which the feline didn't want to go, he might have had some excuse.

But there were no excuses. As Franklin slammed the door behind them, Cameron was acutely aware of the fact that he was only in the dining room because he had chosen to be—because he wanted to be. Even after everything, he still wanted to be by the other man's side. Another wave of anger pounded into the lion with the knowledge. So bloody pathetic!

"What the hell were you thinking?" Franklin demanded as he hit the light switch.

The bulbs in the elaborate fixture overhead flickered into life. Cameron no longer needed a lion's night vision to see Franklin glaring at him.

Meeting the older man's eyes, Cameron studiously ignored the part of him that just wanted to run away and hide from it all, like a silly little cub who wasn't ready to act like a fully grown lion.

Another part of him, a stupid part of him, wanted to apologize, to act as if *he* was the one who'd done something wrong—anything to keep the peace with his lover.

But by far the strongest piece of him, that piece which had survived for the last few years, in the clubs and alleyways where those other parts of him would have sobbed and perished, pushed its way to the forefront of his brain before any other segment of his personality had a chance to utter a single syllable.

"I'm not answerable to you!"

"The hell you're not," Franklin shouted back.

Cameron stepped forward, closing the gap between them until he loomed over the shorter man.

Franklin didn't back down. He didn't even seem to notice the threat before him.

"What could possibly have possessed you to—?"

Cameron didn't let him get any further. "I didn't tell them anything they didn't already know," he snarled.

Franklin faltered then. "What?"

"I didn't tell them anything they didn't already know," Cameron repeated, as he stalked forward. "But that's not exactly news to you, is it?"

"What?" It seemed to be Franklin's new favorite word.

"At least one of them knew what I was long before I walked into that restaurant tonight, didn't he?" Cameron demanded, refusing to let either of them hide from the truth for a moment longer. "Was it Charles' idea that I should be part of your oh so precious deal, or was it yours from the start?"

Franklin stared up at Cameron in apparent confusion, as some sort of survival instinct seemed to speak up inside him and make him retreat. The human jumped as he suddenly found his escape route blocked. He'd backed up so far, he'd reached the big mahogany table that filled the center of the room. There was nowhere for him to go, unless he planned to scramble up onto the top of the well polished surface.

Bewilderment filled Franklin's eyes and screamed his ignorance of the facts, but Cameron couldn't worry about that, right then. If he let himself care about that, then he might have to admit that he cared about the man too, and he couldn't do that—not now.

"You're no better than the rest of them!" he spat. "Rich men with thick wallets... You think everyone's for sale, don't you?" Cameron didn't give him time to answer. "Well, I'm not!"

Not anymore! Cameron barely held the last words back. He leaned forward, until the other man's spine bent as he was forced to arch back over the table.

"Charles..." Franklin began.

"Charles made it quite clear what I needed to do to seal the deal for you," Cameron spat. *Franklin's going to make millions out of this. You should be flattered your arse is worth that much.* The words scrolled around and around inside Cameron's head. Each time he heard them, he felt the other man's hands move against him.

"Was that why you came to the club that first night, because he'd seen me there? Because you thought I'd be able to seal your deal if I was your whore," Cameron demanded.

As the memories echoed through his mind, he tried to rush them forward, desperate to get to the part where he'd strode out of the gents room at the restaurant, leaving Charles Handsford in his wake, leaving the older man no more satisfied than he'd been when he walked in there.

Franklin shook his head as if he had no idea what they were talking about. Cameron bit back a snarl. He'd have to be a fool to believe that.

Catching hold of the human's neck with one big hand, Cameron stilled his head. Barely keeping his claws to himself, he leaned forward and growled into his ear. "That's not the way things are going to be between us."

Franklin's throat moved against his hand as the other man swallowed. When Cameron pulled back far enough to look down into his eyes, Franklin didn't try to speak.

"You're not the one who makes the decisions. You're not the one who gives the orders. There's only one master in this room—and it's not you. Understand?"

Franklin swallowed again. His tongue snuck out and snaked across his lips. He nodded as far as Cameron's hand allowed.

Leaning in again, Cameron let his temple brush against the side of the other man's head as he savored his scent and his presence. "You're *mine*—not the other way around."

Another careful nod. There was more than a touch of fear in the human's scent, but the subtle note of it was almost entirely drowned out by Franklin's unmistakable arousal. Cameron felt his own anger giving way to lust now that they were away from that restaurant and the other men.

He traced his lips down the older man's ear and nipped at the lobe. Franklin tensed, his body jerked against Cameron's.

“Your money won’t do you any favors with me.” Cameron spat out a chuckle that had no humor in it. “It’s more likely to see you whipped. It’s about time one of you was. About time one of the rich bastards who think they own those clubs got a taste of what he was so keen to dish out.”

Cameron rocked his hips forward. Franklin was just as hard as he was. Neither of their bodies seemed to care about the anger or the confusion filling the room. Cameron pressed their crotches tighter together, grinding their cocks against each other through the layers of clothes.

Franklin moaned. A moment later, he closed his eyes as if he hated himself for releasing the sound into the world.

“No!” Cameron bit out.

The older man’s eyes snapped open.

“You don’t get to hide *anything* from me.” Franklin was his—he had no right to stalk him through the club, no right to sneak into his head, take up residence there, then try to refuse Cameron anything he wanted from him. “You put so much effort into finding me. Well, congratulations! Here I am. Now, deal with it.”

Franklin’s hips rocked against him, and Cameron had no doubt that at least some part of the other man liked what his feline master was saying to him. And some side of Cameron loved that he liked it, too.

Still grasping him by the neck, Cameron fumbled at Franklin’s shirt with his other hand. When buttons and fastening became too annoying to deal with, he simply let his claws tear the fabric away from him.

The rest of the human’s clothes quickly followed. There was no complaint from Franklin. No doubt he could afford to replace them a hundred times over.

Cameron snarled as he snatched the last shreds of fabric from his body. Stripping him down that way a hundred times over appealed, even if the businessman’s wallet didn’t. As he stepped back to survey what he’d put on display it was all Cameron could do to bite back a purr.

He was perfect. Cameron tried to close the gap between them once more, only to find his prey trying to squirm away from him. His hand wrapped around the human’s arm and stopped him short, jerking him back to face his master.

“I’m not...” Franklin said. “I was just going to get my wallet.”

Cameron had thought he was angry before. He hadn’t been. Not the way he was right then. Sudden icy fury made the world before him swirl and distort around him.

Spinning Franklin around by his arm, Cameron shoved him forward, over the table. A second later, his body pressed against him, holding him down against the smooth polished surface.

No!

No money. No one else. Just him and Franklin. Just what he'd felt when they were together before—just perfection.

Cameron scrabbled at the other man's skin in his haste to bring them back to that place where it had all been so simple. He slid his hand between the other man's legs. His fingers brushed against Franklin's hole. The older man flinched and tried to pull away from him.

"No!"

Cameron snarled at the back of Franklin's head. He could smell the desire in the man's scent. He was obviously only saying no because he wanted to be the one in control, because he was used to being the one making all the decisions.

It was all Cameron could do to keep his claws in check. It wasn't going to be like that anymore. No one was going to be making his decisions for him. Cameron would be the one who was in control, he'd be the one who gave orders to his human pet.

"No!"

Cameron leaned over the older man, breathing in his scent as he held him down with his chest pressed against his back. His scent wasn't saying no. Franklin's scent wanted him as much as Cameron wanted the other man. Humans' scents didn't lie the way their mouths did.

"Lube! Cameron!" Franklin repeated the same words again. *"Cameron! Lube!"*

Finally the syllables found a way through Cameron anger. He stilled and blinked down at the back of the other man's head.

"There's lube in my wallet," Franklin rushed out.

Cameron hesitated.

"I don't know if a lion could...but a human can't," Franklin said, breathlessly. *"I can't. Not without lube..."*

Cameron ran his eyes down the other man's back, to where his hand was still settled firmly between his buttocks. "You said no," he reminded him, his voice little more than a whisper as he strove to remove all hint of uncertainty from it.

For several seconds, Franklin remained perfectly still, perfectly silent, as if he seemed to sense that everything rested on his answer. "I'm not saying no to you, Cameron. I'm saying—yes, with lube."

Yes, with lube.

Cameron stared down at him as the words circled inside his head.

Yes, with lube.

Very slowly, he pulled back far enough to allow Franklin to squirm out from between him and the table. Several seconds of groping around in his shredded clothes, while he'd knelt next to the newly created pile of rags, and Franklin came back to his side. He handed Cameron a small tube of lubricant.

Some of the tension left Cameron's muscles as his fingers wrapped around it. The other man had taken it out of the wallet before he tried to give it to him.

A moment passed as Franklin looked from Cameron to the table and back again. Dropping his gaze, he stepped carefully past Cameron, as if he thought he might attack at any moment, but he wasn't so wary that he was unwilling to turn his back on him.

Resting his hands on the well polished surface he'd been bent over just a moment before, Franklin spread his legs shoulder width apart and leaned forward slightly.

He was nervous. Cameron could smell the anxiety mixed in with Franklin's desire now that he was calmer. He called out to Cameron so strongly, and not just to his cock, but to something deeper and more instinctive, too.

The lion half reached out toward Franklin, wanting to soothe and comfort the other man as he sensed his uncertainty, but Cameron pulled back at the last moment and tore the lid off the lube instead.

He wasn't going to make a fool of himself fussing over the other man. Franklin wasn't like Ryland or Marrick, or even like Kefir. He didn't need a master the way they did. Franklin would just take it as a sign of weakness, a signal that he could take advantage of his lover and have everything his own way.

Cameron shook his head, denying it was even a possibility. Slicking his fingers, he slid them between Franklin's buttocks and spread the slippery liquid against his hole.

This was what Cameron understood. Sex. Simple and perfect. He was good at this. He could control this.

Franklin remained perfectly still, half leaning over the table, for several long seconds as the lion's fingers teased against him.

Cameron's other hand had a mind of its own that night. It reached for Franklin again. As it came to rest between the older man's shoulder blades, Cameron found himself as uncertain as

Franklin could ever have been, and completely incapable of keeping the contact as careful as he wished he could.

He pushed the older man down, forcing him to bend over the table properly. Franklin didn't even try to resist. When Cameron's fingers slid into him a moment later, the other man gasped, but he also pushed back against the digits in complete acceptance of them.

Quickly undoing his fly, Cameron spread the remainder of the lube along his shaft. His hands moved to the smaller man's hips as his cock kissed his hole. Pushing forward, Cameron sheathed himself inside Franklin, with one harsh thrust. The human tensed. His hands pushed against the table top, skidding against the dark surface.

Cameron stilled then, as he remembered his pet's request from the last time he'd had him in that position. He needed time.

Very slowly, in almost imperceptible increments, he watched Franklin relax and felt the other man's body adjust to the deep penetration.

The older man's hips rocked. He pushed back against Cameron's shaft, as if giving him permission to move.

Cameron's frown deepened. His grip tightened against the skin on either side of the other man's waist at the idea. Franklin's expression changed then. No, not permission like it was permission, the lion realized, perhaps as if he were begging his master to move. Yes, that was what it was like. Cameron purred at the idea.

Swaying back, he thrust forward and buried himself in the other man's arse once more. Franklin moaned his approval. There was no pain, no fear. There was just pleasure and trust. Another thrust, and the sound Franklin made was just a whimper of pure bliss.

Catching hold of Franklin's shoulder, Cameron jerked the other man back toward him, forcing him to stand up straight in front of him. Still sheathed inside him to the hilt, Cameron brought their whole bodies into line.

His clothed skin rubbed against Franklin's naked frame, both above and below where their bodies joined, making him wish he'd taken the time to strip himself down too. It was too late for that, now. There was no way in hell he could think about parting them, even for a few, brief seconds.

Dipping his head, Cameron pressed a kiss onto the other man's shoulder, as his arms slid around Franklin's torso. One of his hands went straight to the older man's cock. The other settled in the center of Franklin's chest and held him back against his master's body.

Franklin tilted his head to one side, giving Cameron better access to kiss his shoulder and his neck. He seemed to be all obedience, all willingness to follow his feline lover's lead. In that moment, Cameron was sure Franklin couldn't even remember which of them was rich enough to buy the other several dozen times over.

In the bright light of the dining room, the restaurant, the deal Charles had offered him when he followed him into the gents' toilets, it was all irrelevant. There was only one man who mattered.

Cameron tightened his grip on Franklin.

He'd been so sure he was past the point where he'd ever be capable of caring about another person, let alone a human, let alone one of the rich bastards who came to the clubs. Suddenly, as Cameron pressed another kiss onto Franklin's shoulder, he started to wonder if he might have been wrong about that.

A purr rumbled through Cameron's body. The sound seemed to seep into Franklin's skin, and rush straight to his core until it tingled along his spine.

"Mine," the lion whispered to him.

Cameron didn't give him a chance to say anything in response. The lion pushed at Franklin's shoulders, ordering him to lean over the table once more.

Neither of them said anything else. There didn't seem to be any need for words. Each time Cameron pulled away from Franklin, it was only for the briefest possible second, and only to plow into him again and again, hammering into his prostate with each thrust.

The air was cool against his naked skin after he'd been pressed against the heat of the lion's body. A shiver ran through him as Franklin discreetly moved one hand off the table, trying to sneak it down to his cock so he could jack himself off. Cameron must have sensed the movement somehow, because he quickly caught hold of his hand and pinned it to the shiny mahogany, refusing him permission to get off that easily.

Franklin should have been pissed off about that. Part of him was sure he should be as mad as hell, but as he lifted his gaze just far enough to study the way Cameron's hand covered his, the only thing that registered inside him was perfection.

Being held like that, feeling the stronger man's control and warmth surrounding him, it was all perfect in a way he hadn't even known existed before he set eyes on the lion.

"Mine," Cameron bit out again.

Franklin could only nod his agreement. Right then, he was Cameron's, and the lion could do whatever he wanted with him. All the money in the world couldn't change that and, as a hard thrust pushed his hips harshly into the edge of the table, Franklin had never been more glad of anything in his life.

He was owned. And he loved it.

A roar filled the air as Cameron buried himself inside Franklin one last time and spilled inside him.

The whole world seemed to stop turning as the lion came, and all Franklin could do was lie against the table and take what he was given. For some reason, that knowledge rushed to his cock just as quickly as everything else Cameron did.

As he felt the lion pull away, it was all Franklin could do not to reach behind him and try to grab the shifter and pull him back. Cameron couldn't go, Franklin needed him!

A rough grip suddenly landed on his shoulder. Strong hands rolled him over on the table, pushing him back along the polished surface until his feet left the floor. Cameron loomed over him, his eyes shining with satisfaction as he ran his eyes over Franklin's naked body and settled on his straining erection.

When Franklin met Cameron's gaze, the shifter seemed to practically dare him to ask if he could come too. Franklin bit his tongue and kept the words back, unwilling to break the silence and ruin the moment no matter how desperate he was.

Cameron smiled slightly. For almost the first time Franklin could remember, his expression wasn't completely filled with bitterness. He seemed almost...happy? Maybe even...pleased with him?

Without any warning, the lion leaned over Franklin's prone body and took the tip of his cock between his lips. Hot, wet perfection surrounded his shaft. A few swirls of a rough tongue, a couple of caresses from an impossibly soft pair of lips and Franklin was already on the edge. His head spun. His hands scrabbled at the top of the table. His feet kicked out as he fought desperately for control. Nothing helped. A few moments in the shifter's talented mouth were all it took.

Franklin tossed his head back, but didn't have the breath to do anything more than gasp as pure ecstasy rushed through him. Just for a few short seconds, all that existed was bliss. There were no doubts about what he should be doing, there was no guilt, no decisions, no game plan. And, when he blinked his eyes open, he suddenly realized that didn't need to change.

Cameron glared down at him, so serious, so intense and so determined to be in control of everything. Franklin blinked up at him as he tried to regain some sort of focus.

Maybe this was what guys meant when they said it was good to just relax and let someone else take charge for a while?

Suddenly, some part of Franklin understood, in a way he never had before, what a certain number of his friends had been trying to tell him—what a few of the *submissives* he knew had tried to explain to him in the past.

Franklin quickly pushed that thought away in favor of concentrating on one that was so much easier to wrap his mind around. Cameron in control was hot as hell!

Without any warning, the lion reached out and pulled him up off the table. Franklin stumbled to his full height, but somehow found that was a few inches taller than he remembered being, and that most of his weight was still being supported by the lion. Only the very tips of his toes rested on the carpet.

Cameron smiled once more, just a fraction, but still with far less bitterness. Very slowly, he lowered Franklin back to the floor and took his arm from around his waist. Turning away from the table, the lion led him out of the dining room and back up the stairs without a word. Within minutes, they were slipping into what Franklin was quickly coming to think of as *their* bed, and to hell with Arslan assigning them to different rooms.

The only fly in the ointment was the way Cameron chose to arrange them in that bed. If he'd lain any further toward his side of it, the lion would be in danger of falling off the mattress. At the last moment, Franklin bit back any comment he might have wanted to make on that.

The lion was in charge right then, it was Cameron's choice where he slept—where either of them slept. Just acknowledging that fact inside his own head, eased something inside Franklin.

Letting his eyes drop closed, he expected his new found sense of peace to see him falling asleep within seconds, but it didn't happen. He was still wide awake several minutes later, running through all the things that had been said before clothes had started to be ripped off.

Cameron thought he had...

Charles had tried to...

Suddenly, Franklin felt the mattress shift beneath him as the lion squirmed to make himself more comfortable.

Franklin held back a sigh as he caught himself hoping Cameron would be moving closer to him. This wasn't supposed to be all about what *he* wanted. The sooner he learned that, the better.

The mattress wobbled again. This time, there was no need for Franklin to hope. The lion had definitely moved nearer. Franklin forced himself to keep his breathing rhythm slow and steady as he sensed Cameron creep closer still.

A moment passed, and the heat of the lion's body caressed Franklin's back. Several seconds of stillness followed before he felt Cameron's arm sneak over his side as the slightly younger man carefully spooned behind him.

Cameron's forehead came to rest on the back of Franklin's head for a moment. He sensed the lion's chest move and felt his lover's breath in his hair as the other man took a deep breath. A minute passed, then another. The changes were so small they were almost imperceptible, but gradually Cameron's body molded against Franklin's skin as the lion cautiously snuggled up against him while trying so hard not to wake him.

Franklin closed his eyes a little tighter. Cameron wasn't merely hot when his lover had the sense to give control over to him and let him call the shots. Cameron was sweet, too. Sweet and...

Franklin frowned into the darkness.

Cameron had control over the whole world. He could have done anything he wanted with him, yet he'd still waited until he thought his lover was asleep before approaching him that way.

Snugly wrapped up in the warmth and safety of the lion's embrace, Franklin found himself wondering what kind of bastards the boy had been dealing with, that he couldn't even believe that he'd be welcomed if he wanted to cuddle.

All at once, Franklin was more wide awake than he had ever been in his life. Thoughts rushed through his mind quicker than he could process them and the only thing that kept him perfectly still was the knowledge that Cameron would probably flee to the other side of the bed for the rest of the night if he realized the man he'd snuggled up against was awake.

Of course he knew exactly what kind of bastards Cameron had been dealing with! The lion had no doubt been dealing with men exactly like him. Men who'd have happily bought a piece of whatever, and whoever, they wanted without thinking twice about—

Hell, without thinking *once*, about who would get hurt in the process.

Franklin fought to keep his breaths slow and steady. For almost the first time he could remember, he couldn't sense anger pouring off the lion. And that was the moment when he realized just how much right the dancer had to be angry with him.

It was so easy to imagine how the various men who'd paid for the pleasure would have treated him. Franklin knew what they were like when they were determined to screw a man over in the boardroom. That would be nothing compared to what they'd be like with a dancer who had no one to stand up for him, protect him.

No wonder the shifter wanted to take control of his lover, of the whole world. Maybe...maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to let the younger man make the decisions for a while.

Franklin silently cursed himself as he felt Cameron drop off into a deep sleep just an inch behind him.

Yeah, that was right. He'd do it because he was a nice guy who wanted Cameron to get whatever he wanted. He wasn't doing it because he wanted it for himself...

Franklin sighed quietly to himself in the darkness, even as he snuggled a little more securely back into the lion's hold on him.

If he'd ever needed any proof that he really was a selfish bastard, this was obviously it.

* * * *

The sheets rustled on the bed behind him, but Franklin didn't take his eyes off the view through the window. He stared fixedly at the sunrise as if his life depended on it.

"Okay," he said. To his immense relief, the word came out calm and steady.

Franklin felt the lion's eyes run over his body. He obviously had the shifter's full attention.

Taking a deep breath, Franklin pushed the last of his reservations aside and plowed on.

"You want to be in control of what happens between us? Okay—I'll go along with that."

Cameron's hand came to rest on his shoulder.

Franklin jumped. As stealthy as a bloody cat, was right. He hadn't even heard the other man leave the damn bed!

Taking a deep breath, he tried to pretend he hadn't made a fool of himself as he continued to stare out of the window he'd been gazing through for the last half an hour.

"You're offering to submit to me?" Cameron asked, very slowly as if choosing each word with great care. "To be my pet?" His other hand snaked around Franklin's waist and pulled Franklin back to rest against the larger man's chest.

"Pet?" Franklin said. Every muscle in his body tensed at the idea.

"That's what lions call the humans who submit to them, who belong to them," Cameron informed him, his tone of voice just slightly wary.

"Oh..." Franklin stared at the tree visible from the window.

"Is that what you're saying you want?" Cameron pushed.

The lion's hands moved. There was no nudging, no polite little request for Franklin to face him. The stronger man simply turned him around bodily until he was where Cameron wanted him to be.

"This isn't a game," Cameron snarled, annoyance suddenly filling his words. "When a lion becomes a human's master, it means something. If you're going to run away every time you want to play the rich boy then—"

"I'm not going anywhere." It wasn't until the words hit the air that Franklin realized just how serious he was about them.

A light came into Cameron's eyes, as if he was pleased by his decision. But he didn't seem to have any idea how to show that. A curt nod was his only response.

Franklin let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding, a tiny feeling of acceptance shot through him. He pushed the feeling quickly aside.

"Last night, at the restaurant," he began.

Cameron's eyes narrowed.

"Whatever happened between you and Charles, I had no idea what he intended. I would never have made you part of any deal."

Cameron seemed to stare at him for a long time, as if judging his sincerity. Finally, Franklin received another nod.

Swallowing down his nerves, Franklin forced himself to keep going. "Did he hurt you?"

The lion blinked at him. He stared again, this time in obvious confusion, as if he didn't understand the question. He looked away when Franklin's words finally seemed to sink in. "I'm fine."

Striding quickly away from the window, Cameron made his way into the bathroom. Franklin trailed slowly along behind him. He paused on the threshold, not entirely sure of his welcome.

Cameron looked over his shoulder and glared at him, one eyebrow raised in query as he approached the hand basin. "Why are you still out there?"

Franklin stepped obediently inside the bathroom, and closed the door behind him. Even if he wasn't sure about everything else, there were certain things that had always been easy between him and the lion.

As Cameron's lips covered his and the larger man lifted Franklin up so his arse rested on the very edge of the countertop by the sink, everything became very simple, and very, very perfect.

Chapter Six

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Franklin barely kept his balance as Cameron caught hold of his arm and spun him around.

After mere hours apart, it was crazy how happy he was to see the younger man. Franklin shook his head in an effort to clear it. “We were discussing the traditions that—”

“No!”

Franklin stared up at the taller man in confusion. He could feel Kefir and Ellery’s gazes boring into his back as they joined him in trying to work out what the hell was going on.

“No?” Franklin asked his, for want of a better word, master. To his relief, the words sounded calm.

“No!” Cameron snarled again. Turning away from the fireside, he strode across to the other side of the den, dragging Franklin behind him regardless of his wishes. Habits developed since his father first threw him into the deep end of the boardroom and demanded he learn how to swim with the sharks, made him try to dig in his heels.

It did him no good. Cameron didn’t even seem to notice. All Franklin got for his trouble were sore feet, as his bare soles, suffered against the carpet.

“What the hell has—?” Franklin began, as they finally came to a halt.

“I don’t want you talking to them.”

“I wasn’t exactly flirting,” Franklin protested, not sure if he should find the lion’s apparent jealousy outrageous or just a little bit flattering. “Surely you can’t object to my talking to them about how things are arranged between lions and—”

“I don’t want you talking to them about *anything*,” Cameron bit out. “Especially not about that!”

Franklin frowned slightly. He looked over Cameron's shoulder, toward Kefir and Ellery. He'd have thought his lover would be pleased with him for wanting to learn how to best get on with his pride. "Why not?"

Cameron barely let him get both words out before he pushed him roughly back against the wall next to the door leading out of the den. One of his hands came to rest in the center of Franklin's chest, holding him there, pressing so hard against his ribs it was almost impossible for him to breathe.

"I'm your master. You don't question me."

Franklin tried to hold the other man's gaze. He managed to maintain eye contact for all of several seconds before he had to look away. In an effort to keep some sort of dignity, he didn't look down. He glanced over Cameron's shoulder instead. His attention once more fell upon where Kefir and Ellery stood on the other side of the room, watching them with both concern and suspicion—to where a feline pet stood with his human master.

By the time he looked back to Cameron, Franklin was reasonably sure why the lion didn't want him talking to those particular men about the traditions that existed within the pride. Theirs weren't the traditions he wanted them to follow, and Franklin couldn't blame him for that.

"Okay," Franklin finally murmured.

What else could he say? *Don't accuse me of being the kind of man who'd make a lion his pet? Don't accuse me of being the sort of man who'd treat him like dirt if he did?* Could a man who wouldn't have hesitated to buy a feline lover really throw those words at someone?

Cameron met his gaze unblinkingly when Franklin managed to look up at him again.

"Okay," Franklin repeated.

It wasn't that unreasonable a request. Right then, with guilt rushing through his veins and almost, but not quite, overpowering his pleasure at seeing Cameron again, it didn't seem like there was *anything* that was too much for the shifter to ask of him.

Cameron silently nodded his acceptance, but any hope that he'd be completely mollified by Franklin's easy acquiescence was short lived. When the lion pulled him closer and brought their lips together, the kiss was a statement of control rather than desire.

His tongue thrust past Franklin's lips, obviously not prepared to wait the milliseconds it would have taken for him to part them willingly. His teeth scraped against Franklin's bottom lip. The lion nipped at the sensitive flesh. Franklin pulled away a fraction, more in shock than pain.

Cameron snarled his displeasure.

Franklin immediately fell still. Instinct gave him no option but to freeze, but it was his choice to part his lips and offer his mouth to the lion properly, as soon as he finally regained control of a few of his muscles and managed to stop acting like some small furry animal trapped by the sound of a top predator.

Cameron's hands wrapped around his wrists and dragged Franklin's arms roughly behind his back, pinning them between his spine and the wall. There was no leeway offered regarding his acquiescence to Cameron's demands right then.

He had no choice but to obey or...Franklin wasn't exactly sure what would happen.

A touch of fear snuck into his veins.

A punishment? He didn't relish the idea. Still, even that would be better than the lion simply giving up on him and walking away. The possibility of Cameron turning his back on him made Franklin try to pull his hands out of the lion's grip, desperate to reach out and hold onto the other man in some way.

Cameron's fists tightened around his wrists in response. Sharp points pierced his skin. Franklin gasped into the kiss as he felt something suspiciously like claws head toward his veins.

A door suddenly slammed next to them. Franklin jumped, his body jerking against Cameron's taller frame. The noise seemed to catch the lion's attention too. He broke the kiss and looked to his right, but he didn't relax his hold on Franklin in the slightest.

Arslan and Ryland stood next to each other, just inside the door.

"Is everyone here?" the leader demanded. He sounded like he was addressing the whole room, but his eyes never once left Franklin and Cameron.

Franklin glanced up at his master. The lion didn't seem the least bit happy to see the other men. He didn't seem pleased with anything in the world right then. As Arslan strode further into the room, Franklin was vaguely aware that Ryland seemed to be trying to catch his eye, but he didn't dare turn his attention away from Cameron, right then.

His chances of his behavior satisfying the lion seemed remote. There was no point in doing anything that he knew wouldn't find complete favor with him.

The sound of a car pulling up outside suddenly crept into the room, catching everyone's attention. Luther and Blaine stepped toward the door, leaving Marrick alone on the sofa where they'd been snuggling.

"Send the car away," Arslan ordered, as they made to leave the room. "Tell the driver our pride will not be accepting a new sacrifice tonight."

Franklin felt the atmosphere of the room change around him, informing him just how significant those words were. Before, the lions and their mates had been slightly on edge but now, it felt far more like they were staring at a loaded gun, waiting for someone to pull the trigger and all hell to break loose.

“You heard me,” Arslan snapped as Luther and Blaine hesitated.

They both slunk from the room without further delay. The room remained very still, very silent while they were gone. They soon slipped back in and closed the door quietly behind them. Just a moment later, the sound of a car driving away seeped into the room.

Through it all, Franklin could still feel Arslan’s eyes on him. Apparently Cameron could too.

“Mine,” he snarled.

“No,” Arslan said, very seriously. “He’s not.”

Cameron twisted away from Franklin then, and he suddenly found himself pushed roughly behind the dancer as Cameron turned to face the leader of the pride. A sound, half snarl, half roar emanated from the back of the younger lion’s throat sending another shiver down Franklin’s spine.

Arslan’s eyes narrowed. “He is not yours until the pride accepts that he is—until you have proved capable of taking care of a human pet in the way the pride expects.”

“I’m his master—”

“No,” Arslan cut in.

“I’m—” Franklin tried to say.

Cameron glared at him over his shoulder, as if daring him to say another word without his master’s permission.

All the boardroom skills in the world meant nothing right then, Franklin found himself falling obediently silent as Cameron turned back to face Arslan.

The older lion held Cameron’s gaze for a second, before turning his attention to the other men in the room.

“The lions will stay here. The humans may wait in one of the other rooms.”

Franklin’s attention went to each of the humans in turn. Ryland didn’t hesitate to do as his master said—not for even the briefest possible second. Marrick barely waited for a confirming nod from Luther and Blaine before he followed Ryland to the door.

Ellery, however, didn't seem so inclined to rush. He dipped his head, whispered something to Kefir and pressed a kiss to his lover's temple before turning away from the little lion and making his way out, too. Somehow he managed to give the impression he was going because he'd given the matter careful consideration and decided that was the appropriate thing for him to do, rather than because he was obeying anyone, but he still went.

Franklin was the only human who found himself frozen in place unable to move.

"Go," Cameron snapped, with barely a glance at him.

Franklin looked helplessly from the dancer to the other feline members of the pride. He couldn't leave him alone with them. He'd seen the way Arslan had glared at him when Cameron acted out. He'd sensed the other lions discomfort with the newcomer and their willingness to follow their leader too.

"I think—"

"I didn't tell you to think," Cameron bit out. "I told you to leave."

Franklin took a deep breath. It required every ounce of strength he had in him not to let his feet overrule his brain and send him walking out of the room as his master's order hit the air, but somehow Franklin managed to hold his ground.

"I want to speak to Arslan before I go," he said, keeping his gaze firmly on the leader of the pride.

"What?" Cameron caught hold of Franklin's chin and forced him to turn his attention back to his master.

The lion's glare almost convinced him to back down. Almost. Unable to turn his head, he looked back to Arslan from the corner of his eye.

The leader of the pride nodded as he seemed to realize how important it was to him. "Very well."

Leaving the other lions behind, he strode toward the door, collecting Franklin from a quietly furious Cameron along the way. As he stepped into the hall, Franklin realized the other humans in the pride were all there waiting for them. There really was no privacy anywhere in the den, no secrets that could be kept from the rest of the pride.

Arslan left the door into the other room open slightly, just an inch of space between the mahogany and the frame, as if he wanted to be sure he'd hear any problems that arose in there while he was absent.

"What is it you wish to say to me?"

Franklin swallowed as he looked past him to the heavy wooden door. "What's going to happen to Cameron?"

He put as much strength and confidence as he could into the query, but Franklin still didn't feel like a businessman in control the whole world. He merely felt like a submissive who'd screwed up and, from that point of view, it was almost impossible for him to look up and hold the older man's gaze.

"We're going to remind him what it means to belong to a pride."

Images flashed through Franklin's mind, each one worse than the one before, until he couldn't stand it any longer. "I don't know what that means," he finally blurted out.

Arslan pulled the door closed a fraction more before he spoke. "The way he's treated you tonight is unacceptable—"

"No!" Franklin cut in, all his worse fears confirmed. "You don't understand."

Arslan glared down at him in silence then, apparently waiting for an explanation that would make him understand to be offered.

"It was my fault—"

Arslan shook his head without even letting him finish the sentence.

"It was!" Franklin protested.

"There is never any excuse for a lion to—"

"Excuse?" Franklin demanded, as panic raced through him, faster and more furious by the moment. "Has it ever occurred to you that he doesn't need an *excuse*, that he might have a bloody good *reason* for hating me?"

After the way the men at the club, men just like him, had treated the shifter, he had so many reasons. Franklin stared up at the shifter, damn near begging him to understand, almost ready to get down on his knees and beg for real if that was what it would take.

"You think it's acceptable for him to take his anger and his frustrations out on his pet?" Arslan asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Yes," that word at least, had some strength in it.

"Would you think it acceptable for me to lash out at Ryland, or for—?"

"I'm not them! I'm not some silly little boy who's out of his depth," Franklin spat out. "I know what I'm doing. And a few put downs won't kill me."

“So when do you think his pride should step in?” Arslan asked, more serious than ever. “When it stops being just your feelings that are hurt? Do we step in when it’s a black eye, or a broken arm? Or maybe when it’s something far more grave?”

Franklin shook his head. Arslan just didn’t understand.

“Or would you think you’d deserve that, as well?”

“Yes!” The word was out before he could stop it. Franklin hadn’t realized how true it was until it hit the air. Yes, he deserved it. Not just for what he’d done to Cameron, but for everything. Suddenly, it was impossible for him to push aside thoughts of anyone and everyone each of his business decisions might have hurt.

Fresh guilt swirled inside Franklin, collecting up every scrap of it he’d repressed since he’d first thrown himself into showing his father that being gay didn’t stop a man being just as big a bastard in the boardroom as he’d been.

Arslan’s annoyance seemed to drain out of him, a touch of sadness crept into his eyes in its place. “Then it is a good thing he has a pride who disagrees with you.” He turned to re-enter the room, apparently finished with the conversation.

Franklin caught his arm and stopped him short. “Please?”

“He won’t be hurt,” Arslan promised. He looked past Franklin then and seemed to catch someone else’s eye.

When the lion opened the door leading back into the den and stepped through it, Franklin immediately tried to follow him.

A hand came to rest on his shoulder and easily held him back.

Franklin spun around.

Ellery stood behind him. The other lions’ mates weren’t far away either.

“Sometimes lions need time to be alone together—to be lions,” Ryland said, gently. “It’s best to leave them to it.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Franklin snapped. He looked back to the den door. It wasn’t Ryland’s lover who was going to bear the brunt of whatever the hell was going to happen in there.

Cameron launched himself to his feet as Arslan strode back into the room. He quickly gave up any pretence of lounging casually in the armchair as if he couldn’t care less what was

going. The tiny strip of Franklin's skin that had been just visible through the gap in the door had disappeared when the leader of the pride closed the door behind him.

He immediately met the older lion's gaze without hesitation and refused to look down, no matter what his instincts screamed he should do when faced by the leader of his pride. Then, he noticed something else.

"Where's Franklin?" His pet hadn't returned to the room. That was wrong.

"He's fine," Arslan said.

"I didn't ask how he is, I asked where he is," Cameron bit out.

"I left him in the hall with the others. They may well have made themselves comfortable in one of the other rooms by now."

That wasn't good enough. Cameron strode toward the door, determined to check on his pet for himself.

Arslan stepped in his way. His hand came to rest in the center of Cameron's chest, stopping him short. "No."

Cameron jerked away from him. "He belongs to me, not you! You can't stop me from seeing him."

"I think you'll find I can," Arslan informed him, each word calm and very controlled. "The way you talk about him, it sounds as if you care about Franklin."

"He's my pet."

"And you're his master?" Arslan asked.

"Yes!"

"Then perhaps it's time you started to act like it."

Cameron snarled. Twisting away as he found himself unable to hold the lion's gaze any longer, he found himself facing all the other lions in the pride. He turned away from them too, but that didn't leave him with a great deal of room in which to pace. He was trapped. Cornered.

"A master can't afford to lash out at his pet whenever he's angry," Arslan said.

"Why should you care?" Cameron demanded.

"Because you're a member of my pride."

"A few days ago I'd never even set eyes on you," Cameron sneered. "You had no idea I even existed—"

“Cameron Pankhurst. You were born on January the fourteenth. You’re twenty two years old. Your parents are Edward and Samantha Pankhurst. Your father was the leader of your pride. You have three brothers, and you were last seen on May nineteenth, three years ago.”

The words were softly spoken, but they cut through every thought in Cameron’s head. Very slowly, he turned to face Kefir.

“There was an argument between you and your father regarding the leader’s right to demand you obey all his orders,” the little lion went on. “You walked away from your parents’ pride the same night, but no one was able to discover which pride you joined after you left them. For a long time, everyone assumed you were with someone else. It wasn’t until I started working on the family lines that we realized that you weren’t with any of the prides in the country. We’ve been looking for you for a long time, Cameron.”

Kefir stepped forward. The smaller shifter reached up and placed his hand very gently on Cameron’s shoulder.

He was no threat. Cameron knew that. A lion only had to look at him to see that he was nothing like the men in the clubs Cameron had danced in, nothing like the bastards in the alleyways.

When Kefir looked up and met Cameron’s eyes there was no challenge in his gaze. The only thing Cameron saw there was pity.

He quickly backed away from him, as mortified by that as he had ever been by the way a punter ogled him. He almost stumbled over the edge of the hearth rug in his haste.

Luther stepped forward as if ready to catch him when he fell. Cameron snarled and jerked away from him. And, suddenly, they were all around him, all staring at him, suffocating him with their presence.

If they’d been lions who were ready to attack it would have been easier. If they’d been humans with wallets and hard-ons, he’d have known how to deal with them, too. Cameron tried to back away once more, only to find the fire behind him.

In that moment, his body realized his human form had no chance of coping with what was going on around it. It did the only thing it could.

Cameron’s claws forced their way out. A lion wouldn’t have to think of an answer. A lion didn’t have to do anything but roar.

The shift burst through him so suddenly he felt as if it might rip him apart from the inside, tearing him into weak little pieces that would never have any chance of coping on their own and would always need the safety and protection of a pride wrapped around them.

Every muscle, every joint Cameron possessed, was wrenched in a different direction. Panic coursed through him, and he lashed out, fighting against everything in the universe, including his own shift.

The pain only grew worse as he fell to the floor, his body unable to support itself as it became caught between shapes, between worlds. A roar echoed around the room as the lion side of Cameron finally won out over the human part of him. His claws scrabbled at the rug as he lurched himself up onto four large paws. Large teeth snapped at the empty air around him as a full lion's mane replaced his usual golden locks.

A shifter that was still in his human form rushed up to him. Cameron didn't even look at who it was. His paw swiped across the man's body. The scent of blood filled the air as his claws left deep gouges in their wake.

The figure gasped, tumbling backward from the force of the blow. And, suddenly, there were men all around Cameron, lions on all sides of him. The world was full of movement and pain and confusion and he was trapped in the middle of it all.

Cameron tried to push them away, to tear at them with his claws and defeat them with his teeth. Nothing he did made any difference. There were too many of them—too many hands, too many bodies pressing him down toward the floor, holding him still as he roared and railed against them.

Cameron arched and twisted, but neither his teeth nor his claws were able to find any target within their reach now.

Words started to flow around him, but Cameron couldn't make them out, couldn't concentrate on them through the pain. He roared again, but when the harsh, agonized sound faded from the air, the words were still there, still caressing and sliding over him no matter what he did, seeping into his mind whether he wanted them in there or not.

With the last scrap of energy he could summon up, Cameron tried to buck and free himself from the hundreds of limbs that seemed determined to hold him down.

His struggles were all in vain. Together, a pride would always be stronger than one lion would ever be—there'd been a time when he knew that without ever needing to think about it.

Cameron collapsed back against the rug, exhausted and defeated. The men pinning him down failed to disappear the way he assumed they would once they'd realized they'd won. Bodies still surrounded him, as he lay there in his feline form, half of them were covered in the dense fur of a lion, the rest were just bare human skin, but all of it was hot the way only a shifter's form could be.

Hands and paws moved across Cameron's fur again and again, but there was no lust in their touch. The men's bodies moved against him the same way his litter mates had when he was nothing more than a cub, bringing back more memories than he'd even known he possessed. The only things he felt from them were care and concern, and acceptance—so much acceptance.

Cameron struggled to draw air into his lungs, barely able to breathe while the other men wrapped tightly around him, filling his world and reminding him of a time when he had a pride, when everything was right with the world, and he'd felt safe in a way he hadn't for the last three years.

His form faltered as his mind once more struggled to find a way to cope. If a lion's brain couldn't understand what was happening, perhaps a human's psyche could.

The shifters around him curled in closer as Cameron morphed back into his human shape between them. A human shaped hand brushed against his arm, a lion's fur covered shoulder rubbed against his leg, fingers stroked through his hair.

So many memories, so many things he'd tried not to think about, that he'd tried not to feel lost and empty without, rushed through Cameron.

A time where there had been both a pride around him, and he'd had nothing in his past to be ashamed of...

There was no going back to that now, Cameron knew that. A lion who was nothing more than a whore couldn't hope to be anything but an outcast to his pride, to *any* pride.

Cameron closed his eyes as tightly as he could and turned his head to the side in the hope none of the lions would see his weakness.

"I don't know all the reasons why you left your last pride, cub. But you've got a new pride now. Everything will be fine."

The sound of Arslan's voice let him know that he had somehow turned his face into the other man's chest as he tried to find a place to hide his emotions.

A strong arm wrapped around him, holding him there, welcoming him just as easily as all the others that cocooned him.

If the older man felt silent tears fall against his skin, he didn't mention them.

The whole pride merely curled a little closer around Cameron in response.

"I..." He bit back the rest of the words as he realized how weak his voice sounded.

Soothing noises immediately surrounded him, a full orchestra of purrs and murmurs ranging from the deep bass that vibrated through Arslan's chest to a sweet top note that could only have come from Kefir.

"I thought they'd come after me," Cameron whispered.

It had just been an argument, some stupid little argument. He hadn't wished to follow his leaders demands, hadn't wished to bow and scrape the same way all the other lions seemed to.

The freedom to do whatever he wished with no one to answer to—it had seemed so beautiful, something to be sought out and cherished, until his pride finally tracked him down and dragged him back to the den. Except... "They didn't."

Cameron turned his face more firmly into Arslan's chest, and there was no way for him to hide the pain and the shame that coursed through him then.

"It was all *their* fault," Cameron whispered, anger creeping back into his voice despite his exhaustion.

"Your pride didn't realize—"

"Not them," Cameron snarled. "The men who... If I hadn't... How could I go back to my pride after I...?"

The rest of the lions pressed still closer around him, cocooning him in the middle of them as they sensed his pain and instinctively tried to soothe it with their presence.

"A pride doesn't abandon one of its number," Arslan said firmly. "No lion will be cast out of this pride, not for any reason."

Cameron struggled to take a deep breath. "I want Franklin." He had no idea he intended to say the words aloud until he heard his whisper hit the air.

"As your mate?" Arslan asked, as his palm rubbed his back, the same way it would a sniffling baby.

Cameron nodded, his cheek rubbing against the older man's chest.

"Your new pride will teach you how to look after him properly," the leader promised. "Then, everything will be fine."

Cameron nodded again, more in the hope that what he said was true than because he actually believed it.

He wanted Franklin. He needed Franklin—maybe even as much as he needed his pride.

“I won’t take his money.” Even Cameron wasn’t sure if the words were intended to be a warning or a protest.

“No,” Arslan agreed. “You won’t.”

Cameron nipped at his bottom lip. His instincts remembered what it was like to be part of a pride, especially when they physically surrounded him the way they did right then. Those same instincts remembered what it was like to feel pride rather than shame too. It was only his mind that wasn’t so sure it would ever be possible to go back to that time.

Chapter Seven

Franklin's pacing brought him to the wall in the living room. Spinning around, he retraced his steps for what felt like the hundredth time that evening. "What's going on in there?"

"They're being lions," Ellery said from his post just to the right of the door.

Franklin glared at him as he made his way back across the room. There was no way he'd be able to get past the larger man if he tried to physically force his way out of the room, and Ellery wasn't an easy man to bargain with or manipulate.

As he leaned back against the wall, Ellery folded his arms across his chest. He didn't look like he loved the idea of leaving Kefir alone with his feline compatriots either, but he also had the look of a man who was going to do the right thing, however much he hated it—a man who thought the right thing for him to do was keep the other humans in that room until the lions had finished doing whatever the hell it was they were doing.

Not for the first time that evening, a roar filled the air.

Practicalities and bloody huge doms forgotten about, Franklin stormed toward the door. Fear raced down his spine fast with each step and nothing else mattered but getting to Cameron.

"He'll be fine, he's just letting off steam," Ryland said, as he stepped between Franklin and the door and, perhaps not entirely by coincidence, between Franklin and Ellery at the same time.

"If Arslan—"

"That wasn't Arslan's roar." Ryland cut in. "I know what my master sounds like—and I know the roar of every other lion in this pride too. Cameron is the one doing all the shouting in there."

Franklin spun away from him. His new pacing route took him toward Marrick. He was by far the most relaxed of all the men present.

Right then, anyone not being on the verge of a complete meltdown made Franklin's blood boil. "You really don't give a damn, do you?" he threw at the younger man.

Marrick smiled slightly. "If I had a panic attack every time my mates got some stupid feline idea into their head, I'd have driven myself crazy by the end of the first week. Luther and Blaine can take care of themselves." He shrugged then. "Either they'll get their own way, in which case they'll be excited as hell and ready to celebrate by screwing me senseless when they come back. Or they won't get their own way, in which case they'll want to pout, play at being hard core doms and screw me senseless when they come back. I'm going to get laid, either way."

Franklin twisted away from him in disgust, wishing like hell the only thing he had to worry about was sex.

Finally, footsteps were heard crossing the hall. Ellery quickly opened the door.

Luther and Blaine strode into the room, heading straight for Marrick. It was impossible to tell if they were celebrating or trying to prove that there was someone they could get their own way with—even if it was only Marrick.

"What happened?" Franklin demanded.

Luther looked up. "Everything's fine. The meeting's finished. Cameron just stayed behind to speak to Arslan."

"And Kefir?" Ellery demanded.

Blaine looked around, as if he expected to see the little lion hiding in one of the corners.

Ellery didn't wait for him to speak again. He strode out of the room without a word. Not knowing what else to do, Franklin found himself trailing behind him.

After more than an hour spent desperate to see Cameron, now that it was time to do that, he could barely make his feet take a step in that direction.

Ellery was halfway across the hall, heading straight for the den, when a voice called out from the landing at the top of the stairs.

"I'm right here, sir." The little lion hurried lightly down the stairs, to stand directly in front of Ellery.

"Is there a reason you didn't come directly to your master?" the older man demanded.

Kefir looked down at his jeans and t-shirt. "I went upstairs to get dressed, sir."

"Why?"

As Franklin watched from a few yards away, the little lion dropped his gaze to the floor somewhere off to his left.

Within a second, Ellery's knuckles were under Kefir's chin, demanding that he look up and meet his master's eyes.

"I was being a lion, sir," Kefir told him, with just a tiny bit of stubbornness in his tone.

"Kefir..."

Franklin heard the warning in his words loud and clear, but Kefir didn't appear to be the least bit afraid of his much larger mate.

"What are you hiding from me?" Ellery pushed.

Kefir's fingers went to the hem of his t-shirt, only to hesitate on the edge of the thin cotton.

Ellery took over, pulling the material up, exposing the younger man's torso. Vivid red claw marks stretched from one side of his body to the other.

"Cameron did that?" Ellery demanded.

"He lashed out at a *lion*," Kefir quickly reminded him. "He didn't even know it was me—he wasn't trying to hurt me."

"And you think that makes this acceptable?" Ellery bit out, guiding Kefir back to sit on the hall chair as if he thought the younger man might collapse at any moment.

Franklin felt the blood drain out of his face as he studied the deep scratches. He'd seen how protective they all were of the little lion. It wasn't hard to imagine what they'd be capable of doing to Cameron in revenge for hurting Kefir like that.

He stepped forward. "Cameron...?" he asked.

Ellery's attention remained on the claw marks that decorated his lover's body, but Kefir looked up and met Franklin's eyes for a moment. "He's fine," the little lion promised.

Franklin looked to the door leading into the den, then to where Ellery crouched down in front of Kefir's chair. Even from several feet away, he could feel the fury rolling off the dominant.

"It wasn't Cameron's fault," Franklin blurted out.

Ellery spared him one brief glance before he went back to exploring the marks on Kefir's stomach without a word.

"He has every right to be angry for the way he was treated in the clubs," Franklin pushed on. "If anyone should be punished for him lashing out at Kefir like that, it's me, not Cameron. It was men like me who hurt him, who made him need to..."

Ellery didn't even glance up at him in response. He merely continued to glare at the deep gouges as if he might be able to heal them by the sheer intensity of his anger and concern.

He didn't look away from the wounds until Kefir touched his cheek and gently asked his master to meet his gaze.

"We'll speak about you trying to hide this from me later," Ellery warned.

Franklin folded his arms across his chest, sure he wouldn't want to be the man on the other end of that discussion, but Kefir just calmly nodded his understanding. "And Cameron, sir?" the little lion asked.

"You're sure he didn't know who he was clawing?" Ellery said.

"Yes, sir."

Ellery held Kefir's gaze for a long time.

Franklin held his breath as he waited for the dominant's verdict.

"I won't throttle him this once—because *you* feel sorry for him. But there'll be no second chances for him, and if I don't think you've made that clear enough to him, I'll see that he understands."

Kefir smiled as if he'd been given a precious gift. He seemed to trust that his master was telling the truth and wouldn't go back on his decision. When Ellery stroked his cheek, Kefir turned his face into his master's hand to kiss and lap at the palm as if everything was once more perfect in his world.

Franklin remembered how to breathe again. Cameron was apparently safe, from one threat, at least.

"Why don't we all move into the living room?" Ryland suggested. "They won't finish their conversation any quicker just because we're all lurking in the hall."

As Ryland herded the other men out of the hall, Franklin allowed himself to be scooped up with the rest of them, but he couldn't lounge on the big sofas the way the others did, couldn't ignore the fact that Cameron wasn't sitting next to him.

Ryland was the only other man who didn't have someone to curl up with, but as the other submissive seemed content to busy himself handing out the food that hadn't been brought into the den when it usually would have, he didn't seem to miss his master's presence right then.

Franklin had nothing to distract him. All he could do was stare at the door until it finally swung open. He immediately launched himself to his feet, only to find himself frozen to the spot, unable to rush across the room and throw himself at Cameron the way he wanted to.

Arslan stepped back and allowed Cameron to walk in first.

Quickly running his gaze over the dancer's body, Franklin checked for any sign of injury. There wasn't a single mark on his skin. He was as perfect as ever. Some of Franklin's panic eased with that knowledge, until he lifted his gaze and met the lion's eyes. There was something different in his expression, something unreadable.

Franklin stood very still, as the lion stepped forward and closed the gap between them. Cameron stopped barely a foot away from him, but he didn't reach out to touch him.

All the air seemed to leave the room.

Franklin could hardly blame the lion for not wanting anything to do with him. He'd have walked away from himself if he could have.

Finally, Cameron waved a hand and indicated one end of the sofa. Franklin's knees failed beneath him. His backside met the sofa cushion. The lion lowered himself gracefully to the seat next to him, casually pulling one leg up onto the sofa in front of him. Neither of them said a word.

Franklin swallowed rapidly as he realized Cameron couldn't even seem to bear to look at him.

The lion's attention went to every man in the room bar Franklin, to every person present, except the one who loved him more than he'd ever believed possible.

It all looked so bloody easy...

As Cameron stared across the room and watched the way Arslan gathered Ryland close to him, his arms easily embracing the smaller man's more fragile frame, protecting him and welcoming him back to his side after being away from him for even such a short time, it looked so simple.

Cameron dropped his gaze. When he looked up once more, his attention immediately fell on where Ellery was fussing over Kefir. Even a damn human had more idea of how to be a good master than he did. Cameron closed his eyes for a moment, hating himself for his weaknesses, for not knowing how to reach out to his lover that way.

Barely lifting his gaze, Cameron glanced to his side. Less than six inches of sofa separated him from Franklin. It might as well have been miles.

"You're not hurt?"

Cameron jerked his gaze up to Franklin's face. "What?" A new wave of self-loathing rushed through the lion as the submissive flinched. He couldn't even make one sodding word gentle...

Franklin dropped his gaze.

Cameron's hand tightened into a fist at his side as he fought against the urge to pull the smaller man closer and cling tightly to him. It was his place to make sure his pet was safe and felt cocooned and protected from the wider world, not the other way around.

"I'm the master. You're the pet," he said, with every ounce of calm he could scrape up.

"Yes," Franklin quickly agreed. "I wouldn't want it to be any other way."

"That means I look after you, I don't need you to do that for me," Cameron said.

"Yes," Franklin repeated.

Cameron ran his eyes over the other man once more. He appeared to be fine. But that didn't mean he hadn't been hurt. Arslan had been very clear about that when they'd spoken after the others had left the room. A master wasn't just responsible for his pet's *physical* safety.

Taking a deep breath, Cameron arranged the necessary words carefully inside his mind before he tried to say even a single syllable. "The way I spoke to you earlier was wrong."

Franklin opened his mouth to speak, but Cameron held up a hand and stopped him short. It had to be said, and it was too important to be interrupted.

Arslan's words raced around and around inside the lion's head as silence descended over them for several long seconds. *With power comes responsibility.* And he was responsible for Franklin now.

"I shouldn't have lashed out at you that way." *A master should always be patient with his pet.* "It won't happen again."

"No." Franklin shook his head. "You were right."

Cameron's brow furrowed.

Pure instinct made him want to snap, to tell the other man he'd speak as and when his master told him that he could, not whenever the hell he wished. He shouldn't interrupt when his master was still struggling to find his own words so he could say the right thing to him, so he could explain such important things to him.

Power. Patience.

Cameron took another deep breath. It did him no more good than the first one had. He lowered his hand, freeing it so he could push it through his hair while he struggled to pick up his lost thread.

Franklin was quick to take the action as a sign for him to continue. "You don't have to apologize to me."

"Yes, I do." An apology wasn't a sign of weakness, it was a sign of strength—a sign that his pet could trust him to do better in the future.

Franklin shook his head. "I get it." His lips curved into a strange mockery of a smile as he tilted back his chin, as if ready to receive a blow. "I know I've got it coming for the way I acted before. I'm not a coward, Cameron. I'll take whatever punishment you think I deserve."

Everything Arslan had said to Cameron just minutes before clashed headlong into Franklin's own words. All at once, they smashed into a mess of jumbled thoughts inside Cameron's head.

He was too close to the edge. And all he knew for sure was that he was scared and confused and that made him want to lash out at the nearest and easiest target. Wrapping his arms around his torso, he clamped his lips firmly together in an effort to stay completely silent and not inflict any more damage than he already had.

"Cameron?" Franklin prompted after a few seconds.

The lion glanced toward his pet. There wasn't a great deal left of the over-confident business man that had strode into his dressing room at the club that first night they'd actually spoken to each other. The only thing that made him sure he was still facing the same person, was the simple fact that the other man's scent called to him as strongly as ever, filling him with desperation to make the other man his mate.

Without the expensive suit and the forced air of superiority, it was hard to think that the other man could ever be anything like those men from the clubs.

Tearing his gaze away from Franklin for a moment, Cameron looked to the others in the room. Arslan was watching him very carefully, just as he'd promised he would, ready to step in if necessary, just as he had been when he'd taught the other members of his pride how to deal with humans.

Cameron had no doubt that the leader had heard every word they'd said to each other.

"Lions don't punish their pets the same way humans do," Arslan said, very firmly. "It would be far too easy for serious harm to come to a pet that way."

Cameron nodded his understanding.

“Although that doesn’t mean that all human pets can simply stop needing to receive a punishment, just because they happen to belong to a lion.”

Cameron’s attention snapped across to where Ellery was sitting, Kefir now curled up on his lap, and snuggling contentedly into his shoulder.

“What?” As easily as that, all of Cameron’s hard work to keep his temper in check became pointless. Anger flooded back into his voice.

“Some human submissives have trouble with guilt. Sometimes they can’t get past that without receiving some sort of punishment and closure from their masters. It’s not uncommon.”

“No.” Cameron wasn’t certain about a great deal, but right then, he was sure about that. There would be no punishments. No one was going to hurt Franklin. He was going to see to it that no one ever hurt his pet ever again—especially not his master.

Suddenly, unable to put off being alone with his pet for another second, Cameron moved to the edge of his seat. “We’re going to our room.” Standing up, he led the older man out of the living room.

With every step he expected to hear Ellery’s or Arslan’s footsteps behind him, rushing after them to split them up or to set rules and limits on what they would be allowed to do together when they were alone, maybe even to stop them from ever being alone. But the only footfalls he heard were from Franklin’s bare feet as his pet followed him up to the bedroom they shared.

“If you want to hurt me, you can.”

Cameron had just turned to close the door. His back was to his pet when Franklin said those words. That was something to be glad of. He could so easily imagine what expression passed across his face as he heard them.

Any response he might have wanted to make lodged in Cameron’s throat. All he could do was turn around and stare at the older man.

“If you want to…” Franklin cast a hand about as if he couldn’t think of the right word. “Whip me or whatever, you can.”

“You think I should punish you?”

Emotions flickered across the submissive’s face as their eyes met. There were too many, and they were far too complicated for Cameron to read. His pet’s scent offered him no better chance of understanding him.

Desire. Uncertainty. Fear. Lust. Sadness. Joy.

There was no sense in the other man's signals to his mate right then.

A minute passed. Finally, Franklin spoke again. "No," he said very softly. "I don't think you should punish me."

"Ellery was wrong," Cameron said, success coloring his words as he remembered how to breathe once more. Arslan was right, and everything would be fine if he just did as the leader said. It wasn't going to be as complicated as he thought, after all.

Franklin turned away from him then, to look out of the window over the garden. "No, Ellery was right."

The words were so quietly spoken, Cameron needed a lion's hearing to catch them.

"Right?" he echoed.

Franklin didn't even attempt to answer him.

Cameron caught him by the shoulder and spun him around. The smaller man almost stumbled, but Cameron held him upright, one strong hand wrapped around each of his arms. "What do you mean by that?" he demanded.

"I said, he was right," Franklin admitted. "A punishment would probably help me stop feeling so guilty."

"But you just said..." Cameron's pale blond eyebrows came together as he stared down at him in confusion.

"I said I'm not asking you to punish me. I shouldn't have asked you to in the first place."

Staring at the human didn't convince him to make any more sense.

His pet fidgeted in his hold, as if half of him wanted to push his master away and half of him didn't. "I deserve to feel guilty," Franklin finally muttered.

Cameron moved his hands to either side of Franklin's face and held his head back, making him look up at his master.

Control. Patience. Talk to him.

"You're not making sense."

Franklin tried to look away, apparently determined to make it impossible for Cameron to do any of the things Arslan said he was supposed to do.

How the hell was he meant to look after the other man, to take care of him and see that he had everything he needed, if the man wouldn't even keep his requirements consistent for two sentences in a row?

The skin on the sides of Franklin's cheeks were turning white. He was holding him too tight. Even after he realized that, it was several seconds before Cameron could convince himself to release his pet from what must have been a painful hold.

Spinning away from him, Cameron strode across to the other side of the room. Resting his hands on the back of a chair set in front of a small desk, he took several more deep breaths. Whoever started the rumor that big lungfuls of oxygen helped in stressful situations was an idiot.

All that time he'd spent in those clubs, wishing he could go back to a time when he could be part of a pride and take a mate. It had never occurred to him that the clubs would be so easy to understand by comparison—at least he knew what those men wanted from him.

"I am your master. You are my pet." Cameron wasn't entirely sure whose benefit he was repeating that fact for.

"Yes," Franklin agreed, without any sign of hesitation.

"I'm responsible for you," Cameron went on, as he turned to face the other man once more.

Franklin was about to say yes, Cameron had no doubt about that. But, at the last moment, he seemed to hesitate.

Cameron's gaze narrowed as he watched the other man's lips fail to move.

"No." Franklin looked up and met Cameron's eyes then. He squared his shoulders slightly too, as if ready to do battle over the answer if necessary.

"No?" Cameron stalked several paces forward.

"I don't expect you to take responsibility for me, or to look after me. I'll be your pet, if that's what you want to call it. You can give me any orders you want and do whatever you want with me."

Cameron frowned. Stepping past the older man, he slowly circled him.

"You can treat me exactly the same way the men in the clubs treated you," Franklin went on, while he stood very still under Cameron's gaze. "You can take whatever revenge you want on me, too."

The lion made another complete circuit around the submissive before he realized what Franklin was actually talking about being punished for. "You weren't one of the men who paid to screw me."

The businessman looked down for a moment, before seeming to force his head up and fix his gaze on the far side of the room, fighting against every instinct he possessed. "I would have."

Cameron stopped. He stood perfectly still behind the other man for several long seconds.

"When I came to find you, I intended to pay whatever it took to get you to leave the club with me," Franklin went on. "I'm no better than the men who bought your time in the past."

Cameron stepped around the submissive once more, until he stood face to face with him. "You'll do whatever I want?"

"Yes."

Cameron lifted a hand, only to hesitate. The other man's words called up all the anger and confusion he was so used to feeling. But at the same time, the memory of the lions curled close and protective around him made him so desperate to hold onto the other man the same way—to pass that safe, protective feeling on to him. He dropped his hand back to his side

"You don't wish to be treated the same way the other pets are treated, to have a master who cares for you and—"

"No."

No... Franklin sounded very sure about that.

Cameron looked into the other man's eyes and suddenly the truth was obvious. He didn't want a master at all.

He just wanted a lion who would screw him and get him off. Cameron turned sharply away from him. In some ways, Franklin was obviously just like the men who'd paid him in the past. The only difference was who screwed who.

Somehow Cameron kept those words back, and even he didn't know if he did that because Arslan had told him to be patient or because he was scared to think how much pain they might reveal, how much he wished he was the kind of lion a man might want more than sex from.

"Fine," he said, almost calmly. He turned back and met the other man's gaze. "Whatever I want."

Franklin swallowed rapidly as he nodded.

Cameron quickly turned his back on the other man and strode across to the door.

"Where are you...?" Franklin's question trailed off as Cameron stopped with the door half open.

"I want you to still be here when I come back to this room," Cameron informed him, in that same careful tone.

Stepping out onto the landing, he closed the door quietly behind him. He was already in the downstairs hallway, looking at all the doors around him when he realized he had no idea where he was going. A glance at the front door and he turned quickly away from it.

He wasn't going out there. He wasn't going to make the same mistake again. He was going to stay with his pride and his pet. He was going to... Cameron didn't know what the hell he was going to do. But he was sure he should be doing it inside the house, not outside it.

Barely holding back both a roar of confusion and a whimper of agony, he sat down on one of the bottom treads of the stairs. When he heard a footfall at the top of the flight, he knew it would be either Ellery or Arslan. The only question was if he was going to receive a lecture on how lions should act or how humans should act.

Cameron blinked as he saw a much smaller shadow than he expected fall across the hallway carpet. He looked up, just as Ryland reached his side and lowered himself to sit down next to him.

"I'm going to talk for a minute or two. If you could just let me finish, I'd really appreciate it," the submissive began.

Cameron stayed silent.

"I'm not going to pretend I know exactly what you're going through, because I don't. And I don't want to make light of anything that's happened to you either." Ryland took a deep breath. "My parents disowned me because I wasn't the son they thought they were going to get and because I couldn't fit in with the life they wanted me to live. And, sometimes I hate them for that—sometimes I hate the whole world for it, too."

Ryland looked down at his hands for several long moments. Cameron followed his gaze. The human's knuckles were white.

"And, there are days when I hate knowing that the only reason I agreed to be thrown to the lions was because I needed the money. Arslan knows why I came to him, and he doesn't care. He says he knows that I'm not thinking about money when I'm with him. But there are days when *I* care, when I'm so angry with myself for what I did that I can't bring myself to believe anyone could ever look at me and see anything other than a whore..." Ryland cleared his throat. "I don't know what you're going through, but maybe I have a better idea than most of the men in this house."

Cameron lifted his gaze and met the other man's eyes. It was obvious how much it had cost him to say those words.

“What goes on between lions is between lions,” Ryland went on. “I don’t know what happened in the den earlier tonight, but I do know that your pride cares about you. I know that Franklin was frantic with worry for you—”

“I’m the master, not him,” Cameron cut in.

“I worry about Arslan,” Ryland said, softly. “Sometimes pets worry about their masters. Sometimes humans worry about their lions. It’s not a sign of disrespect. It doesn’t mean we all want to be Ellery when we grow up. Franklin cares about you. And if sometimes, you don’t see why he should, that doesn’t change the facts.”

Cameron took a leaf out of Ryland’s book and stared down at his own hands, where they were clasped, resting on his knees, his claws pressed into his own skin.

“Everyone in the pride will do everything they can to help you both. You just need to try and see yourself from the outside rather than the inside when you listen to what other people say to you. Arslan told me once, that finding a way for a lion and a human to fit perfectly together wouldn’t be easy, but it would be worth it. He was right.”

Cameron nodded. It would be worth it.

Ryland moved then, as if he was about to stand up and walk away.

“Was Ellery right too?”

Ryland met his gaze, confusion clear in his eyes.

“Do humans feel a need to be punished?”

Ryland seemed to think about that for a long time. “I screwed up just before Arslan and I were mated,” he finally confessed. “My master decided I needed to prove that I could be trusted to look after myself and make good decisions before I was allowed out of sight of the pride. I barely even got to take a leak in private for weeks. It wasn’t a punishment exactly, but...”

He seemed to retreat into his thoughts again. Cameron held his breath as he waited for his final verdict.

“Yeah,” Ryland said, eventually. “It helped me feel as if I was proving something to the pride and to my mate, like I was making amends. If Franklin regrets hurting people in the past, maybe some kind of pain would help him feel as if he’d leveled the scales or something.”

Cameron nodded very slowly as he tried to wrap his mind around it all.

Ryland smiled slightly before he pulled himself to his feet and made his way back up the stairs.

Cameron remained where he was for several minutes, running everyone's words over and over inside his head, trying to hear them from the outside. Finally, he was ready to follow the submissive up the stairs. Pushing open the door leading into the bedroom, he found Franklin still wide awake, sitting up on the bed, waiting for him.

It was important that a master be certain about everything, that he make sure his pet had everything he needed in order to be content and happy.

"I've made my decision," Cameron informed his pet, as if he hadn't just sat on the stairs wondering if he was doing the right thing for so long, his legs had gone numb. "Your punishment will take place tomorrow."

Chapter Eight

He was not going to act like a nervous schoolboy called into the headmaster's office to be caned. Franklin was a grown man who owned several very successful businesses. He'd proved to his father and everyone else that, gay or straight, he could hold his own in any boardroom on the planet.

He might be a lion's pet and a submissive and a great many other things he hadn't considered himself to be a few weeks ago. He might even be head over heels in love, which Franklin knew he'd have considered even more unlikely than anything else he'd become. But he wasn't a coward.

He'd asked to be punished, and Franklin was more than willing to be damned before he flinched now, no matter what the lion might have in store for him.

He looked back across the room to where Arslan, Ellery and Cameron were deep in conversation. They were too far away for him to catch a single, damn word they said to each other. He couldn't even try to lip-read while their heads were bowed together.

There seemed to be some debate going on. Taking a deep breath, Cameron tried not to sigh as he let it out.

"They'll make sure nothing happens that will bring any real harm to you," Kefir offered.

"I'm not scared." The snap in his voice made him sound like he was lying. Franklin managed to scrape up a small, apologetic smile that encompassed both Ryland and Kefir as he realized he was making a fool of himself.

"Ellery will be explaining human traditions. Arslan will be giving him advice on if it would be possible for a lion to adopt them without hurting his lover too badly," Ryland expanded.

Franklin nodded.

Ellery turned away from the group. All the submissives immediately focused their attention on him.

"Kefir." Ellery beckoned the little lion across the room.

A moment later, Kefir left the den, closing the door neatly behind him. When he came back he had a whip in one hand and a set of leather restraints in the other.

Ellery took both from him without a word. He looked down at the length of the whip, inspecting it very carefully. Franklin was completely mesmerized by the sight of the implement until Cameron stepped forward, to stand in the middle of the room. Suddenly, both Ellery and the whip might as well have been invisible

"The punishment will be a whipping," Cameron announced. "Twenty lashes."

Franklin stood up. "Yes." To his eternal relief, his voice remained perfectly level at the prospect.

"It will be administered by Ellery, at my request, since he is the only master present who knows what human skin can tolerate."

"Yes," Franklin said again. It wasn't his place to argue about the details of a punishment. He wasn't supposed to enjoy it. He had no right to prefer it if it were Cameron on the other end of the lash.

Franklin's master stepped forward again, his expression very serious as their eyes remained locked. "In here?" he asked.

No matter where he was looking, Franklin knew the lion wasn't speaking to him.

"No." Ellery and Arslan said the word together.

"Somewhere where there's more room," Ellery said. "Somewhere he can be restrained."

Cameron turned to Arslan, so did everyone else, except Franklin.

"The old, green bedroom," the leader of the pride decided.

Cameron nodded.

"It's at the top of the stairs, third door on the left."

Cameron nodded again. He reached out to Franklin, and took hold of his wrist. As the shifter led him from the room, catching the cuffs Ellery tossed to him on the way past, Franklin became aware that the others were hanging back and sent up silent thanks that he might have a moment alone with his master before it all started. Maybe he didn't deserve his wish to be granted, but he was still glad it had been.

The door leading into the bedroom Arslan had selected for the punishment swung open as Cameron turned the handle. Unable to look at his master right then, Franklin studied the room with ferocious intensity. Maybe it had been green once. Now, it was somewhat between colors.

Dust sheets covered every piece of furniture that had been too big or cumbersome to move out of the room. Patches of the walls had been daubed in different shades as someone tried out different samples. The whole space smelled of paint.

With his hand still wrapped around Franklin's wrist, Cameron led him forward, to the base of a large four poster bed. One deft movement had the long chain connecting the cuffs looped over the rail above their heads. Any curtains that might have hung there were long gone. Only the bare length of wood remained.

The lion tugged on the cuffs, as if to check that they would hold no matter how much his pet struggled. Franklin swallowed. His palms turned slick with sweat.

"You're sure this is what you want?" Cameron suddenly asked, turning back to face him.

Franklin met the other lion's eyes for a second. There was at least part of Cameron that wanted it, too. He could see it in his expression—at least part of Cameron knew he deserved it.

"Yes."

Cameron nodded.

Franklin couldn't claim to be any sort of expert on being whipped, but he was pretty sure the punishment was generally conducted on bare skin. He reached for the hem of his T-shirt and pulled it up over his head.

If he had his way, that would have been enough. Being naked for a pride meeting where everyone else was naked was one thing. Being stripped down for a punishment would be nothing short of humiliating. But, Franklin reminded himself again, he wasn't supposed to enjoy it...

He reached for the buckle on his belt.

"No."

Franklin hesitated.

"It's your back he'll be whipping. That's the only part of you he needs to see."

All Franklin could do then was try not to look too relieved, or too flattered by the jealousy in the lion's voice, as he stepped forward and offered his wrists up to the cuffs with all the confidence he could muster.

Cameron buckled them in place. A moment later, his hand stroked down Franklin's back very gently, as he inspected the skin that was about to feel the full force of his punishment.

Franklin dragged a deep breath into his lungs as he looked up at his bound wrists. The only important thing now, was for him not to screw this up. He just had to stand there and take his punishment. He just had to accept a little bit of the pain he'd been so quick to dish out to others without a thought.

He might not have wielded a whip, but he'd still hurt people, he couldn't ignore that fact any longer. He closed his eyes, and the memory of the pain in Cameron's eyes came flooding back to him.

He sensed Cameron move to stand behind him, then stepping closer. His hair trailed against the side of Franklin's face as the lion's shirt brushed across his back and all Franklin wanted, more than anything in the world, was to turn around, to offer his mouth up to the other man, and to feel his kiss against his lips.

Keeping his head bowed, Franklin stayed perfectly still. He had no right to ask for something like that.

A creak of the door hinges soon informed him that he and his master were no longer alone. Franklin swallowed down a howl of protest at anyone else being present for this.

Cameron stepped away from him then. Franklin closed his eyes tighter than ever. He never remembered feeling so alone in his life, and the more footsteps he heard bringing other men into the room only made him feel more lost, more isolated than ever.

He felt...probably much the same as Cameron had up on that stage.

Words were spoken behind him, but he couldn't focus on them. His head was back in the club, his gaze on the audience as they all stared up at Cameron. His stomach turned over at the thought of being the man up there, or knowing that at the end of the dance, one of them would want to—

"Franklin?"

Jerked out of his thoughts, Franklin opened his eyes and fixed his gaze on the dust sheets covering the bed. "Yes?"

"Are you ready for the punishment?" Cameron's tone made it obvious that it wasn't the first time he'd had to ask the question.

"Yes." It was the only word it felt safe for him to say any more.

The room fell silent.

Franklin continued to stare fixedly at the dustsheet on the bed, not even allowing himself to glance over his shoulder. He received no further warning before the whip struck his back for

the first time. The air rushed out of his lungs. A cry escaped with it as his body jerked and he pulled at the cuffs binding him to the bed frame.

Pain suddenly flared all the way across his back, harsher and more intense than anything he'd ever known. The strength rushed from Franklin's legs and suddenly he knew why he'd had to be bound. It wasn't about control. There was simply no way in hell he'd have stayed on his feet if he hadn't been.

Franklin's mind was still reeling from the first blow when the whip came down on him again. Sweat broke out on his skin. Franklin ground his teeth together to keep back a cry. The only sound that left him was a pain-filled groan.

Still cursing himself for his weakness, Franklin clenched his hands into tight fists above his head, and frantically tried to keep it together, to stay strong and take his punishment.

His pain was nothing compared to Cameron's. Franklin knew that. As the lash fell against his back for the third time, the knowledge wasn't enough to give him the strength to remain silent.

Cameron flinched as the whip fell against Franklin's back for what already felt like the hundredth time to the lion.

The submissive screamed out, a sound so raw, so agonized Cameron could barely stand to hear it.

He folded his arms across his chest in an effort not to reach out and stop Ellery lifting his arm to deliver another blow, to stop himself clamping his hands over his ears too. His claws sliced through his own shirt, dug into his biceps, as his control almost failed him.

His heart raced faster and faster as he watched another vivid red line bloom across the submissive's shoulders.

No!

The word roared through his mind, drowning out almost everything else. The only words that survived the onslaught of the sound were the ones he'd been repeating to himself ever since he agreed to the punishment.

A good master makes sure his pet has whatever he needs. If this was what Franklin needed, Cameron had to make sure it was what he received. He had to.

Blood dripped from the lion's arm, as his claws cut deeper into the muscle. Cameron barely felt it. All he could think about was the other man's pain. Humans were more fragile than

lions. The fact that it was a human whipping Franklin ceased to make him believe that would keep him any safer.

Cameron swallowed rapidly. He should have loved seeing one of the rich men tied up and whipped. He'd imagined it so many times, when he'd had no choice but to take what they'd dished out to him.

Revenge should have been sweet. It shouldn't have turned his stomach.

To have one of those men—

Cameron's thoughts faltered. One of those men...

None of the men who'd offered him money in those clubs had felt the least bit guilty for anything they'd done to him. None of them would have seen any need to be punished for taking whatever the hell they wanted from him. None of *them* were the man under the lash.

Franklin would have offered him money, Cameron had no doubt about that. But as he looked across the room at his lover, it suddenly occurred to him that that alone didn't mean he'd have treated him the same way the punters had if he'd taken it.

With his mind racing faster than Cameron had ever known was possible, the lion tried to picture Franklin acting that way, tried to imagine him in the place of the other men. It...

It wasn't possible...

The whip fell again, pulling another harsh, pain-filled sound from Franklin's throat.

Cameron blinked at the scene before him as he was roughly shoved back into the here and now. He dragged his claws out of the maligned flesh on his arm, carelessly tearing his skin further as he rushed forward.

Somewhere unimportant, somewhere outside the bubble that seemed to exist around him and Franklin in that moment, someone spoke. Cameron didn't have any attention to spare for him as he took several more paces forward, until he stood directly behind Franklin.

The submissive's shoulders shook as he fought to draw a breath into his body. The dark red lines of pain the whip had painted across his back stood out in stark contrast to his skin. With just a few inches between them, Cameron stalled. His hand reached out to the other man, but he had no idea how to touch him, how to soothe him without making his pain worse.

"Don't stop..." The words were barely more than a broken whisper. A lion's hearing still made easy work of them.

Don't stop, Cameron repeated to himself, because the punishment was what Franklin needed. Any reply that he might have wanted to make caught in his throat.

The man he loved needed him to finish the punishment. He needed the whip to fall the full twenty times. The man he loved...

Cameron closed his eyes.

The humans in those clubs hadn't quite killed off that ability in him then. Cameron supposed he should be grateful for that, but it was hard to think that anything in the world could ever be right when the man he loved was in so much pain.

"Finish the punishment." The words were so calm, so confident, even Cameron himself found it hard to believe they came from his own lips.

"Cameron?"

He recognized Arslan's voice, but Cameron still couldn't drag any scrap of his attention away from Franklin.

"I can't use the whip while you're standing there."

Ellery's words finally sparked Cameron into action.

He couldn't remain where he was. All at once, that was obvious. He wasn't where he should be, but Cameron already knew where his true place was in that moment. He took a step forward.

With all the care he was capable of, Cameron cautiously lined his body up behind Franklin's.

Lifting his arms, he settled his hands on the back of the other man's hands. His limbs were longer than the slightly shorter man's. He bent his arms a fraction at the elbow, forming them into the best shape with which to shield his lover from the whip.

His shirt brushed against the whip marks on his pet's back. Franklin whimpered.

Cursing himself, Cameron leaned back slightly, so they didn't touch.

"Cameron?" Arslan asked again.

Finally, the lion managed to turn his head toward their audience. He looked to Arslan and Ellery, and to Kefir and Ryland too.

"Finish the punishment," Cameron said again.

He met Arslan's eyes, then Ellery's. He saw the two men look toward each other and exchange slight nods as the feline and the human worlds reached an agreement.

Ellery turned his attention back to the whip in his hand, freeing Cameron to turn his own attention back to his pet.

"Cameron...?" Franklin whispered.

“Hush.” Cameron pressed a tender kiss onto the back of the other man’s head.

As the whip fell against his back for the first time, the lion arched into the pain, determined it wouldn’t send him swaying into his lover’s back. Sickening heat rushed through him, just as it had so many times in the past. His shirt was no protection against the leather.

He closed his eyes for a moment, but his position didn’t falter. He’d learned how to take a whipping a long time ago. For the first time in his life, he was glad of his experience. If it helped him take better care of his pet, it could only ever be a good thing.

“Cameron?” A touch of desperation blossomed in Franklin’s voice, he tried to turn in his restraints. “What are you doing?”

“What I should have done from the start,” Cameron whispered.

Franklin shook his head. His struggling pushed his back against Cameron’s chest.

“Don’t,” he chided, gently, the way a full grown lion might chide a little cub who was under his care. “You’ll hurt yourself.”

And that wasn’t acceptable. If it was the last thing he ever did, Cameron was going to make sure no one hurt his pet ever again. The world became a very simple place as he realized that was what his life was about now. He’d make sure Franklin was never hurt, and make sure he never did anything he’d have to feel guilty for either.

“I...”

“You’re mine. Let me look after you?” It came out more like a plea than an order.

Franklin stilled. “I...You...”

“You’re nothing like them.”

Franklin looked over his shoulder. They were too close together to see each other properly, but Cameron couldn’t have taken a step back for all the money in the world.

Franklin turned to face front. “I...”

“I know the men in those clubs. And I know you. You’re nothing like them. Maybe you managed to pretend you were for a while. Maybe you gave men money, but...” Cameron shook his head, wondering how the hell he’d ever been stupid enough to think that made him anything like the same.

Franklin swallowed rapidly.

“Finish the punishment,” Cameron said again, loud enough for the others to hear him.

A movement on the other side of the room warned Cameron that Ellery was about to fulfill his request.

The whip came down again, then again. Cameron's stomach turned over, his head spun, his back burned. Still, he never once stopped whispering to Franklin, trying to reassure his pet that everything was fine, that his master wouldn't let anyone hurt him.

He told him over and over again, that the punishment felt different to a lion, that the whip didn't really sting at all when it hit a shifter's flesh. As the pain from one particularly harsh lash seeped into his body and gradually faded just far enough for Cameron to drag another breath into his lungs, he couldn't quite raise the words to lie again. All he could do was wait for the next blow.

A minute passed, but the whip didn't fall again.

Cameron blinked open his eyes. Turning his head, he looked across toward the other members of the pride.

Ellery held his gaze as he pointedly set the whip aside. The punishment was over. Cameron pulled another shaky breath into his body. The punishment was over. The same fact rolled around and around inside his head until it stopped being about anything so simple as a punishment.

It was over. The worst was over. Everything that had happened since he left his parents' pride was over...

Cameron closed his eyes again. Turning his face into Franklin's hair, he hid there for a moment, simply relishing the knowledge.

"Sir...?"

"It's okay," Cameron whispered. "Everything's going to be fine." He'd make sure everything was fine.

He was the master. That was his job.

Cameron nuzzled gently against the other man's neck once more before slowly turning his attention to the buckles holding the cuffs around Franklin's wrists. Moving made the injured skin on Cameron's back stretch in a different direction. Pain rushed through him, making him clumsy. Somehow, he still got the buckles undone. Without the leather to support him, Franklin immediately began to collapse forward.

Unable to pull the smaller man back safely against his body without hurting him, all Cameron could do was guide his pet down onto the dust sheet shrouded mattress. He quickly followed him onto the bed, not at all sure how to make him more comfortable, but as determined as hell to try.

As Franklin lay face down against the coarse sheet, Cameron dipped his head, and lapped as gently as he could at one of the harsh red whip marks. His pet murmured. His back arched slightly, as if he was attempting to offer himself up to his master's tongue more eagerly.

He didn't need to do that. Cameron brought his hand to rest on the unmarked skin over the small of his pet's back, encouraging him to simply rest and let his master look after him—let his *mate* look after him.

It had been so long since he thought himself capable of being the kind of lion who had a mate. He stared down at the other man, but he couldn't bring the words to his lips.

"Is there something you want to ask him, Cameron?" Arslan asked from the side of the bed.

Franklin half lifted his head, before lowering it back to the bed once more. Cameron turned to the leader of the pride and held his gaze for several long seconds.

"I..." Cameron looked back down at Franklin.

"Do you remember what the right words are?"

Cameron nodded. He'd thought about them often enough, when his body was being used and his mind found itself free to wander into all the darkest corners of his brain, to those places that it was always the most painful for him to investigate.

"Sir?" Franklin turned, rolling half onto his side as he tried to face his master in spite of his obvious pain and exhaustion.

Suddenly his eyes opened very wide. He reached out and touched Cameron's arm, where the blood was drying on the tattered shirt sleeve around the claw marks he'd left in his arm.

Carefully taking Franklin's hand in his, Cameron guided him to lower it back to the bedspread. Except, somehow, he didn't let it go when Franklin's hand was back where he wanted it. His own hand stayed wrapped around Franklin's fingers as he sat next to the older man on the bed and stared down at him.

There was no way he could fail to ask the question then.

"If you come to us willingly and of your own free will, with no thought for your own gain and only wishing to add to the pride, then you are welcome."

Franklin looked up at him, his expression gaining more focus by the moment as he seemed to realize that what was being said to him was important.

He parted his lips to speak, but Cameron put one fingertip of his other hand against them and silenced him, before he could either protest or agree.

"If you wish to belong to the pride, to take your rightful place in the pride, you are welcome," he said. It was a battle for him to keep his words loud enough for anyone but Franklin to hear them, but Cameron forced every syllable out as clearly as he could. The words had to be heard by the pride. That was important.

Franklin's answer had to be heard by the pride too, no matter what it was.

The pain in Cameron's whipped back became irrelevant as he pushed on. "If you come to us without lies or secrets, you are welcome."

As he stared down at Franklin, there was no way Cameron could believe that the other man would ever say yes to his offer, that he could ever deserve that the other man should say yes to it, but he kept going, regardless.

As he felt a true lion's instincts racing through him for the first time in years, there was nothing else he could do but try to claim his mate. "If you are who we believe you to be, say that you wish to take your rightful place in the pride, and you will be welcomed."

Cameron dropped his fingertips from the other man's mouth, but Arslan stepped forward and spoke before Franklin had a chance.

It was obvious that he was going to tell him not to accept, that they weren't ready. Cameron dropped his gaze, knowing the leader was probably right, knowing that being part of a pride meant sometimes having to accept that.

"Franklin," the older lion began. "It's important that you understand what Cameron is asking you. He's asking you to become his mate. To be...married to him, a human would say. It is a permanent bond—it means you will spend the rest of your lives together. It's not something that should be entered into lightly."

Franklin dropped his gaze when Arslan fell silent. When he looked up again, his eyes went straight to Cameron. "You really want...me?"

He sounded so shocked by the idea, Cameron automatically reached out to him, cupping the smaller man's cheek in the palm of his hand. Unable to trust his voice he nodded. He wanted him.

"Are there words I'm supposed to...?" Franklin asked.

"A clear yes or no, is all that's required," Arslan said.

"Yes."

It was the single most confident word Cameron could ever remember leaving the other man's mouth, and the only confident word that seemed to be said by him rather than someone he was pretending to be. He said it like he believed it with his heart and soul.

It took all Cameron's strength to look away from him then, and to turn his attention to Arslan. "You'll give us your blessing?"

The older lion looked from Cameron to Franklin and back again. "I think you'll suit well," His expression turned a little more serious then. "That doesn't mean I think you should rush. There is plenty of time. You'll both need time to heal each other."

"But the whole pride will help however we can."

Cameron looked past Arslan, to where Ryland stood next to him. He smiled slightly as he saw the look in the submissive's eyes when he looked up at his master. Cameron turned his own gaze back to Franklin.

He was so exhausted, and in so much pain, but there was a spark of hope in his eyes that Cameron realized he hadn't seen there since the other man had agreed to be his pet.

Reaching out to him he gently stroked his fingers down the submissive's cheek.

"Do you need help to get back to your room?" Arslan asked.

Franklin looked up to his master. He didn't want that. Cameron could see it in his eyes.

"We'll stay here?" Cameron suggested.

Some tiny part of the tension that had flooded into Franklin's body eased, letting Cameron know he had guessed just the right thing to say.

He looked up to Arslan. "We want to sleep in here tonight," he said, with more confidence.

He was disobeying his leader, contradicting him in front of his pride. Cameron only realized that when the words were already said. Memories came flooding back of the last time he'd stood up to a leader that way. The roar he expected to fill the air failed to materialize.

Arslan's gaze flashed back and forth between them.

"Franklin is your mate. As a lion, it is your responsibility to see that your mate can rest comfortably here, if this is where you wish him to sleep."

Cameron nodded his understanding.

Arslan looked around the room as if assessing it in a million different ways. Finally, he seemed willing to grant their request. "It won't do either of you any harm to stay here."

In reality, Cameron was sure they all started to move quickly toward the door then. But somehow, it still seemed like hours before he was able to finally be alone with his new mate. Closing the door between them and the outside world, he leaned against it for a moment, his forehead touching the cool of the woodwork as his hand rested to one side of it, relishing the term—his mate.

Franklin had turned his head and was watching him carefully when Cameron turned back to him. Their eyes locked.

Hours might truly have passed then, without either of them being aware of it. Neither of them moved until a knock sounded on the door. Spinning around, Cameron tore it open, ready to be furious with anything that interrupted their time alone together.

Ryland stood on the other side of the threshold, a set of blankets in his arms. “We stripped the bed before we put the dust sheets over it. You’ll need to remake it.”

He handed Cameron the sheets. The lion automatically reached out and took them from him.

“Do you need help with that?” Ryland asked, with careful politeness.

Cameron shook his head. “I can do it.” He could look after his mate. He didn’t need anyone’s help. Franklin was his, not Ryland’s.

The submissive stared up at him in silence for several long seconds.

“Thank you,” Cameron said, more politely. “But I can handle it on my own.”

Ryland nodded his understanding as he turned away and retraced his steps to the master bedroom. Closing the door firmly between them and the outside world once more, Cameron made his way back to his mate too.

“Can you stand?” he asked, setting the bedding to one side.

Franklin nodded. He shuffled to the edge of the bed, but his legs seemed to disagree with his assessment of his capabilities. His knees buckled as soon as he tried to put even a little of his weight on them.

Cameron sprung forward. Remembered not to catch hold of his pet’s back, he wrapped his hands tightly around Franklin’s arms instead. A lion’s strength still made it easy for him to guide the submissive to a chair, so he could rest there while his master remade the bed for him.

Franklin allowed him to help him to and from the bathroom and tend to his wounds with well practiced skill. He didn’t mutter one word of protest or make any attempt to take control of anything between them.

The submissive didn't seem to mind the silence that stretched out at all, but Cameron's inability to find the right words tore at the lion's soul a little more with every second that passed. The marks that crossed his back were barely an annoying irritation in comparison.

The same couldn't be said for Franklin. No matter how hard he seemed to be trying to hide it, it was impossible for Cameron not to see the way every movement hurt him. Nothing could have shocked the lion more than when the human reached out toward him as he stripped them both down and tried to settle them between the sheets as painlessly as possible.

"You need to rest," Cameron reminded him.

"I need my master," Franklin said. "I need my *mate*, sir."

When the other man looked up and met his eyes, it was obvious to his master, just how much it had cost him to say that.

Dipping his head, Cameron brushed their lips together very gently. "I'm not going anywhere." As he broke the kiss, Cameron dipped his head further and nuzzled at the other man's shoulder, rubbing his forehead against the older man's skin and simply relishing his presence. "I love you. You know that, don't you?" He couldn't bring himself to lift his head and look the other man in the eye as he said it.

"I love you, too," Franklin whispered back.

There was no doubting the sincerity in the words. Cameron closed his eyes as he wrapped those words carefully around him before he finally had to force himself to pull away. "You should rest, now."

Franklin's hand wrapped around Cameron's wrist and tugged his arm forward.

Every muscle in Cameron's body tensed as he felt his pet try to take control of his master. Unwilling to tussle with him when he was so fragile, Cameron somehow forced himself to allow the other man to do as he pleased with his arm in spite of the memories it stirred up.

His fingertips brushed against Franklin's cock. The other man's hand left his wrist then, but it didn't need to hold it in place any longer. Cameron's fingers wrapped around Franklin's shaft all on their own. His pet was getting hard.

Without even thinking about it, he stroked the rapidly stiffening shaft with a slow, gentle rhythm. Within seconds, Franklin's hips rocked forward, trying to push his cock harder against his mate's palm. He winced as his back protested against that sort of movement.

"No." Cameron reached out and settled his other hand on the older man's hip, stilling him.

Franklin glanced up and met his eyes, but he quickly dropped his gaze. He seemed about to pull back, but Cameron halted that movement too.

“Let me look after you.”

Franklin hesitated. “If you don’t want to—”

Cameron moved his hand from Franklin’s hip to the side of his face. “I’ve wanted you ever since I laid eyes on you. That’s not going to change. Just...” He put everything he had into making his words a question rather than a demand. “Just let me look after you?”

“You’re hurt too,” Franklin whispered, his voice softer than the lion had known was possible.

Cameron shook his head, brushing that aside. Leaning forward, he offered another kiss to the submissive’s lips. A moment later, his tongue lapped at his shoulder. From there he worked his way down Franklin’s body.

Apparently eager to please and give his master an easy angle for the imminent blow job, Franklin tried to roll onto his back. Cameron’s hand returned to his hip just in time to stop his lover from being reminded of why that would be a really bad idea.

He kept the submissive on his side as he finally reached Franklin’s cock. Taking his hand away from the now flourishing erection, Cameron wrapped his lips around the other man’s shaft and took it into his mouth.

He murmured his own pleasure at the taste of his lover’s enjoyment as pre-cum leaked onto his tongue. Dipping his head, he took him deeper. He knew what he was doing. He’d learned exactly how a man like Franklin wanted him to—

Franklin’s gentle rocking of his hips ceased abruptly as Cameron snarled, but the lion was far too lost in his memories to pay immediate attention.

His pet was nothing like those men.

Cameron pulled back until only the tip of Franklin’s cock remained in his mouth. His tongue caressed the head, again and again. The rocking action resumed as Franklin whimpered his enjoyment.

Cameron looked up, just in time to see Franklin turn his face into the pillow in an effort to muffle the sound.

“No.”

Cameron quickly scrambled up the bed until they were face to face. “No. I want to hear you.”

Franklin swallowed rapidly, but he also nodded. "Please?"

The kind of man he'd thought Franklin was when they'd first met would have pushed him back down the bed. Any one of those rich bastards would have had his hand on the back of his head without even thinking about it.

None of them would have asked. None of them would have cared what his answer would have been if they had.

"And if that's not what I want?"

Franklin let out a little mew of frustration, but he also nodded his acceptance of his decision as if it never occurred to him to do anything else. There was no impatience in his gaze when their eyes met, only uncertainty, as if he was worried that his master was rejecting him.

It wouldn't do to let his pet think that.

Cameron wasted no more time encouraging his lover to roll onto his stomach. The vivid red marks on the older man's back tore at something inside him, and Cameron quickly moved his gaze lower, until it caressed his pet's buttocks. His hand quickly followed his eyes' lead, smoothing gently over the firm pale globes.

Ryland understood lions. He'd tucked some lube in between the blankets when he'd delivered the bedding to the door, obviously sure they would be needed. Quickly retrieving the supplies from where he'd stashed them beneath one of the pillows, Cameron slicked his fingers.

"You're going to stay very still and let your master look after you, aren't you...love?"

There was no laughter at his halting addition of the endearment. Franklin merely nodded enthusiastically against the pillow.

Just enough preparation for Cameron to be sure he wouldn't hurt the other man, and he quickly rearranged them until he held himself over the older man's body with one hand on the mattress to either side of him. Franklin moaned his encouragement as the tip of Cameron's cock nudged between his cheeks.

Very slowly, very carefully, Cameron rocked his hips forward, sheathing himself in the other man's body with as much control as he was capable of.

Hands resting on the mattress on either side of his lover, he arched his spine and held himself up, unwilling to touch the older man's back in case it should cause him any extra pain, regardless of how the skin on his own back protested.

Franklin's head was turned to the left. Cameron watched his profile as pleasure flashed across the pet's face. Franklin opened his eyes then. Whatever he saw, it sent even more bliss rushing through him.

Cameron followed his gaze. The room had been moved around as it had been prepared for redecoration. A tall standing mirror had been placed to the left of the bed. Both their reflections showed clearly in it—Franklin laying beneath him, as Cameron loomed over him, his hair falling over his face and his shoulders flexing under the strain of the position. And it showed the emotion in Franklin's eyes too.

No man in any club had ever looked at him that way. In that moment, Cameron knew he wanted a man—this man—to look at him in that way for the rest of his life. Nothing else mattered.

He rocked forward, thrusting deep inside the submissive over and over again, glorying in every sensation that rushed through his veins in response.

When Franklin came, Cameron didn't even try to outlast him by more than a fraction of a second. He opened up his mind and his body to the pure ecstasy that cascaded through him, and for the first time in so long, he felt free to be himself as he came. He roared his pleasure up to the ceiling as his pet jerked and came beneath him.

Cameron couldn't collapse forward and keep their bodies together the way he wished he could, right then. He had no choice but to pull away and move to the other side of the bed, but Franklin immediately turned his head toward him. He was exhausted and in obvious pain, but all his attention was still on his mate.

Minutes passed, filled with nothing but heavy breaths and pleasure-addled thoughts, but finally Cameron's pet spoke.

"You really think this will work, sir?" Franklin asked, very softly.

"Yes." Cameron was willing to be damned before he'd let any trace of weakness creep into the word. "They're a good pride. And we are part of that pride, now. And you're my mate. And I'm your mate. And..."

And suddenly the words stopped being an effort to convince himself as much as the other man. There was no need for anyone to convince Cameron anymore. He knew it in the instinctive way he remembered knowing so many things a few years before. Everything would be okay. It wouldn't be easy, but it would be worth it.

The other man smiled at him as their eyes met, as if he understood exactly what his master was thinking and agreed with every single bloody word of it.

Cameron smiled back then, without any trace of bitterness in his expression. Yes, everything would be just fine.

About the Author

Kim Dare is a twenty-seven year old, fulltime writer from Wales (UK). First published in December 2008, Kim has since released over thirty BDSM erotic romances.

While the stories range from male/male, male/female to all kinds of ménage relationships and have included vampires, time travelers, shape-shifters and fairytale retellings, they all have three things in common—kink, love and a happy ending.

Published since 2008, Kim also writes BDSM erotic romances for Total-e-bound.

Kim loves to talk to her readers and can be found at www.kimdare.com.

*Also Available from
Resplendence Publishing*

***Ryland's Sacrifice* by Kim Dare**

Principles don't pay tuition fees. When Ryland's math scholarship disappears overnight, he has two choices. He can borrow money from fellow student Jason Burrows, who has very interesting ways of collecting debts. Or, he can volunteer to be thrown to the werelions.

One night spent playing the part of a willing human sacrifice will give him enough money to finish his PhD. It seems like a good deal-right up until the moment he finds himself naked, blindfolded, bound and surrounded by lions.

***Marrick's Promise* by Kim Dare**

Marrick thinks that being thrown to the lions will be the ultimate adrenaline rush, and he's not disappointed. But his plan is to try everything life has to offer once. He has no intention of visiting the lions again.

Blaine and Luther don't expect to give any of the human sacrifices they share another thought once they leave the den. This man's different. They have no intention of letting this one go. The only question is, while they are willing to share Marrick with each other, are they willing to share each other with a human who could become as important to each of them as they are to each other?

***Extinction* by Carol Lynne**

Professor of Environmental Science/Wildlife studies at UNLV, Jack McBain has spent his adult life trying to track a legend overheard during his youth. Born and raised in the Canadian Province of Newfoundland, Jack remembers his grandparents telling stories of a race of people eradicated by European settlers in 1829. According to the legend, the Beothuk people didn't die out as first thought, but were transformed into wolf shifters.

When Newfoundland wolves began to appear in great numbers, the European settlers began killing them under the guise of population control. In 1910, the last of the Newfoundland wolves was shot, making them one of the few extinct species of wolves in the world.

Following spotty leads, Jack begins to track what he believes are Beothuk/Newfoundland shifter wolves. His search leads him to the Lake Mead National Recreational Area outside of Las Vegas. There, on Spirit Mountain, he finally comes face to face with not only the shifter he's been looking for, but the man of his dreams he didn't know he needed.

***Tropical Hedonism* by Dakota Rebel**

After a boating accident, Sean Harris wakes up staring into the eyes of a handsome doctor. Even when he discovers that he is on an island within the Bermuda Triangle, and there is no way for him to get back to his old life, he can't be too disappointed if it means being stuck with the doctor.

Dr. Wesley Carpenter cannot believe that the younger Sean Harris would want anything to do with him. After half-heartedly turning down the advances of his patient, he realizes that resistance is futile.

The men find themselves falling for each other quickly, but ghosts from their pasts and outside influences try to get in the way of their happiness. Sean and Wesley may be on the island forever, but neither is sure if that guarantees they'll be able to continue their *Tropical Hedonism*.

***Mind F*cked* by Mia Watts**

Sage has the ability to read minds, but only in high passion moments when thoughts transmit at a higher frequency. But the gift is double-edged. Sage is inordinately handsome. Some might even say he's a walking orgasm. So what's a half-breed to do when every person he meets seems intent on seducing him, and how will he know if the man he chooses will love him for more than his looks?

Joe has never been the object of anyone's lust before. Now Sage, the hottest guy he's ever laid eyes on, has Joe starring in his sexual fantasies. It would be perfect if only Sage could shut up for one minute, and quit talking about his own hotness—or about how he can read minds.

Meanwhile, Joe and Sage must secure the last three Zodiac Stones and prevent their theft while they wait for exhibition. Can they put their sexual tension aside long enough to stop a clever thief? And even if they do, will Joe's heart be a casualty of their inevitable fling, or could Sage really be looking for more than a one-night stand?

Also Available from Resplendence Publishing
The Not Quite Wicked Series

***Wolf in Men's Clothing* by Dakota Rebel**

Little Red Riding Hood has nothing on Rhys. On his way to his grandmother's house, Rhys' car breaks down in the middle of nowhere. Fortunately for him, there is a big, bad rescuer watching and waiting to sweep him off his feet.

***Just Right* by Bronwyn Green**

When Department of Natural Resources officer, Gwendolyn Locke, hits a black bear on the way home from work one night, her entire view of reality changes. She discovers that shape-shifters exist, and she's just become Goldilocks to three gorgeous, very aroused men who also happen to be werebears. Being snowbound has never been so hot.

***Open Sesame* by Mia Watts**

Alister Baban overheard a business discussion that netted him and his Uncle Cassimer a lot of money. When the Simsim Group stock crashes and declares bankruptcy within weeks, the owners immediately suspect the Babans of playing dirty.

Oz Adamo, one of four brothers who owned Simsim Group, agrees to abduct Alister to obtain information and win back the lost pensions of former employees.

Tied to a bed and lusting after his captor, Alister fights the sexual attraction he has for Oz. They want information and he isn't about to give it. But Oz loves a good challenge, and shrewd, serious, sexy Alister is naked and his—at least for now.

***Heart of Ice* by Brynn Paulin**

Kai is perfectly unhappy with his life. Cast into a role as shop boy and forced into marriage to save his family, he sees nothing good in his future. In fact, his betrothed, Gerda, seems to hate everything he enjoys. Especially winter and his attraction to dominating his partners. His prospects look grim...until the Snow Queen arrives.

Wyn has spent her life alone, living vicariously through those who love winter. When she learns of Kai's predicament, she knows she must save him. If only she could save herself. She craves his dominance, but there's one tiny thing standing in their way. No human can touch her without experiencing chilly agony. And that might bring any relationship to an icy death.

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