



Shane's
FURY

The Lost Shifters Series Book 10

STEPHANI HECHT

Shane never prepared to do what no other Leopard shifter had done before and that was fall in love. Try telling that to his heart because from the first touch of a certain Panther named Trevor, there was no turning back for Shane. Then just as Shane found his mate and true happiness, Trevor is brutally torn from him when a Cobra shifter, bent on revenge, captures the Panther. Now Shane finds himself helpless as he scrambles to find his lover before the Cobra enacts his final act of vengeance and kills Trevor.

Ever since his captivity, Trevor has known pain. He's known degradation. He's known terror. However, he also knows that Shane will be coming for him. And gods help the Cobra when Shane finally does arrive because hell hath no equal to a Leopard's fury. Trevor only hopes that Shane finds him in time, or else all hope will be lost.

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Shane's Fury
Copyright © 2011 Stephani Hecht
ISBN: 978-1-55487-826-0
Cover art by Angela Waters

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

Shane's Fury
Lost Shifter Den

By

Stephani Hecht

Dedication

*To Nikole. You're the best friend anyone can ask for.
Thanks for being there for him.*

Chapter One

Funny how one could get used to fear. All they had to do was live with it every day.

Dalton curled his fingers around the bars of the tiny cage as he stared at his newest masters. Like his previous owners, they were snake shifters and, like his previous owners, this new batch was just as mean. It'd only taken a few jolts from their cattle prod for Dalton to reach that conclusion.

His slavers seemed to be part of the same nest ...coven...batch, whatever the hell a group of snakes were called. Unlike the previous gang, a mix of breeds and sexes, this bunch was all male Cottonmouths who were tall, muscular and horrific looking because their bodies were stuck halfway between shift. Not quite human, not quite snake, they were some kind of gross cross. It would seem like they had gathered only the bad features from both forms, too. So Dalton felt pretty certain none of them would be winning any beauty pageants anytime soon. Not even the makeup gurus from *Toddlers and Tiaras* could cover up that kind of ugly.

One of them glanced in his direction and Dalton felt a shiver slither down his spine as he caught himself locked into the creature's red-eyed gaze. A smile curled the man's thin lips as his forked tongue darted out. His molted brown skin glistened under the poor lighting of the industrial garage. Dalton took in a deep breath and immediately regretted it when he got a nose full of reptile stink mixed with oil and rusted metal.

"The kitty looks tasty," the snake observed, his eyes glowing with hunger.

Damn if a whimper didn't bubble from Dalton's throat. Not exactly his proudest moment, but not even a full-grown Jaguar or Tiger shifter could have been brave when being stared at by a dozen Cottonmouths. What chance did a puny Lynx like him have?

"You can't eat him, Kirk," the biggest snake snarled. A mountain of a man, Dalton immediately pegged him as the leader within ten minutes of the bunch buying him. His assumption was later proven true that same day when the man had killed, then eaten one of the members of his own group. Dalton still had nightmares in which the soundtrack was that snake's final screams for mercy.

"Why not?" Kirk moved closed as that freaky tongue worked over his mouth.

Even in his human form, Dalton still felt small

and defenseless. Add in the fact that he was trapped inside an overly large dog cage and he realized that if Kirk did attack, Dalton could do nothing but scream for help that would never come. He cowered to the back corner of the cage and tucked his knees to his chest.

Since they'd only given him one change of clothing since they'd first captured him eight months ago, his cheap jeans were crusted over with grime and they smelled nearly as bad as the garage. That still didn't stop him from lowering his face onto his knees and hiding his eyes.

Even though he was a mere Lynx, the act of submission made him want to growl in protest. He told his inner predator to get over it. When they'd first murdered his family and taken him to his new life, Dalton quickly learned that defiance only brought pain and humiliation.

"We bought him for breeding, not food," the leader reminded Kirk.

Even though that hadn't been the first time Dalton heard what his new purpose in life was to be, a wave of revulsion and despair still slammed into him. Tears built up in his eyes. Never had he felt so alone...so cold. He just wanted to curl up with his littermates so he could be warm and safe.

That would never happen though, because all his littermates had been killed, along with his parents. For some reason only known to the

snakes, they'd spared Dalton and frankly he wondered if his family hadn't been the lucky ones.

He peered up from under his dark bangs only to see Kirk still eyeing him up. Now Dalton knew how all those rabbits suffered when he and his siblings used to hunt them down. All he was missing were the long ears, wiggling nose and fluffy tail and the picture would be frigging complete.

He lowered his head again and sucked in a breath as he spotted a shadow of movement from the corner of his eye. *What in the hell is that? All of the members of the snake group are already here. Unless they invited company over, but somehow I don't see snakes as the social let's-get-together-for-Scrabble types.* Careful to avoid alerting Kirk to what he was doing because some inner instinct screamed to Dalton to keep his discovery a secret, he tilted his head to the side for a better look.

All he saw were the same row of empty cages, the usual beat down couch and card table. That didn't fool him for a moment because he knew for certain that somebody was there. The only thing that remained unanswered was whether that somebody was friend or foe.

Then just as he was about to give up any hope of seeing the newcomer, a small figure slipped from the shadows. Not reaching six-feet and weighing less than two hundred pounds, the man

was tiny compared to most shifter standards. No fear came from the man even though it didn't take a genius to figure the odds were seriously stacked against him. Either this guy was suicidal or he was....nah, just suicidal because there could be no other explanation for somebody willingly walking into a den...coven...nest...damn! Dalton vowed if he ever got free, the first thing he'd do is look that fact up because now it really started to bother him.

Dalton couldn't make out the strange man's features because the hood of the shifter's black hood covered his face, but the pair of short swords in his hands let it be known he didn't come for a coffee date. The way the weapons hung loose in his hands screamed that the weapons were a favored accessory used often.

Kirk turned and took in the newcomer. Recognition flared in the snake's eyes. He even let out a soft whimper of fear. Dalton's nostrils flared as the waves of terror came off not just Kirk but the rest of the snakes. Whoever this shifter was, he must be pretty nasty to generate that kind of reaction from a room full of murdering, heartless monsters. A few of them even took several steps back and one poor sap pissed his pants.

Ha! It doesn't feel so good to be afraid, does it, you forked-tongue freaks? A soft, hysterical sounding chuckle slipped past Dalton's dried lips.

"Shane, what are you doing here?" Kirk asked,

his body trembling so violently Dalton could see it from his cage.

Shane? Dalton's heart lurched. He knew that name, although the one who spoke it before had done so in a loving way instead of with the fear that saturated Kirk's voice.

"You know why I'm here," Shane replied in a bone-chilling calm tone.

"We don't have him."

"I already know that, you brain-fucked belly walker. If Trevor was here, I would have him safely recovered and you all would already be dead for touching what is mine."

Trevor! I knew it! With a soft sound of desperation, Dalton surged to the front of the cage and once more curled his fingers around the bars. Fear mixed with hope as he worried that Shane would miss his presence. Since they'd tucked him in a far, dark corner there were no guarantees that Shane wouldn't overlook the poor Lynx in the crate.

Then the snakes all circled Shane and Dalton began to worry that the man wouldn't survive long enough to notice anything let alone a caged Lynx. His throat constricted painfully as he saw six snakes charge the small male.

Shit, there was no way Shane stood a chance. Not only were they all way bigger, but it was just him. While Trevor had always spoken of how

skilled a fighter Shane was, nobody could take on six attackers at once. That only worked out well in action and ninja flicks. Then Dalton detected another feline scent, this one much closer. Turning his head, he spotted a feline shifter crouched within inches of the cage. Dressed head to toe in black fatigues, the man had speckled brown hair and amber eyes. He flashed a reassuring smile before pressing a finger to his own lips in the classic shhh gesture.

Even though Dalton had only ever communicated telepathically with his littermates, sheer desperation made him attempt to do so with the other feline. *You have to help him.*

The brown-haired stranger grinned. *I wouldn't worry about Shane. He can handle twice that many snakes without breaking a sweat.*

Dalton gripped the bars so tight, the thin metal bit into his skin. *But they're so much bigger than he is.*

If you don't believe me, why don't you take a look and see for yourself? The feline nodded to the center of the room.

Dalton obeyed and let out a soft gasp of shock at the fully engaged battle. One snake already lay on the ground, blood pouring from his chest, while a second was curled into a fetal position, not moving. A grunt made Dalton shift his eyes up in time to see another snake take one of Shane's blades to the gut—that guy soon joined his

buddies in the dead body pile.

The snakes began to snarl, curse and yell. All the while, Shane remained eerily silent, letting his weapon do all the communication. As for Dalton, he found himself horrified at the carnage, yet unable to tear his gaze away at the same time.

Shane moved as if his body was made for one purpose only and that was to destroy. He plowed through the snakes like a B-movie karate star would work his way through a bunch of bad-guy wannabe extras. It reminded Dalton of the restaurant scene in *Kill Bill*, only this was much more intense because he could sense the very real terror rolling from the snakes.

Soon the floor and the air became thick with blood as more of the snakes fell to Shane's swords. The blades no longer glinted in the weak light because red now covered the metal. The hood finally slipped down so Dalton got a good look at Shane. His first thought was how the feline's looks were at such direct odds with his actions.

Soft, sensual features went hand-in-hand with his dark blond, slightly curly hair and big brown eyes. If not for the fact that his full cheeks were covered in blood splatters, Dalton would almost be tempted to call the feline, angelic looking.

Of course, the fact that he was all but massacring a nest of Cottonmouth shifters belayed that impression. Even as that thought passed

through Dalton's head, a snake shrieked, then ran at Shane. Despite the fact the feline had over two hundred and fifty pounds of death heading his way, Shane smiled.

"He's frigging crazy," Dalton said aloud.

The other feline grinned. "Yeah, but we can't help but love the little punk anyway."

Dalton turned to give the man a gaped mouth look of astonishment. Several muffled bangs came from outside, making Dalton jerk in response.

"Ah, that'll be the rest of the team taking out the snakes who were guarding the building," the feline observed. "By the way, my name is Brent."

Dalton had heard that name before, too. Although his father never served as a solidier to the local feline coalition, their family did answer to Mitchell, their leader. So Dalton knew that Brent was Mitchell's second-in-command and littermate.

Brent lifted his head and yelled, "Hey, Shane. Are you going to wrap this up anytime soon?"

Shane flicked an irritated glance Brent's way, but otherwise didn't reply. He just continued to whittle away the snakes until only Kirk remained. Even though he knew it was wrong, a savage smile curled Dalton's lips as he watched the snake try to crawl away, wiggling on his stomach just like his animal counterpart.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going?"

Shane snarled as he grabbed the snake by the ankle and dragged him back.

Brent slid a worried glance at Dalton. "This part may get kind froggy so you might want to hide your eyes."

Dalton blinked in astonishment. Things were actually going to get *worse*? Then he recalled the way Kirk had been eyeing him up and the inner predator in him surged to the front. After everything Kirk had done, it would feel so damn good to see the snake experience some of the very pain he was so good at dishing out. Karma was a bitch and today she was using Shane as her weapon.

"No, I want to see him suffer," Dalton said, cringing at the way his voice shook a bit.

Brent cocked a brow. "Are you sure? Shane isn't exactly buddies with the Geneva Convention."

Thinking once again back to his family and all the other feline captives he'd seen suffer while under the snakes *care* steeled Dalton's resolve. "Yes."

There would be plenty to see, too, going from the savage expression on Shane's face. "I'll give you three seconds to tell me everything you know about the Cobra."

"If I tell you, he'll kill me," Kirk wailed.

Shane flipped out a dagger and thrust down.

Kirk let out an inhuman cry as the blade pierced his hand and pinned him to a wood baseboard.

Crouching so his lips were inches from the snake's ear, Shane snarled, "If you don't tell me, then I won't kill you and we both know that will be worse."

Yeah, because that would mean Shane would be playing with his prey, much like a real-life feline would do in the jungle. If Dalton had to face those options, he knew he sure as hell would become very cooperative. Hell, he'd have offered to lick the entire coalition's boots clean rather than face an angry Shane.

In the end, Kirk picked neither option. Moving so quick his free hand was a mere blur, he pulled a gun out of his coat and put the muzzle to his own head.

Dalton flinched, a whimper jerking from his chest as the loud report filled the air. Shane flinched, too, but that was probably to avoid the shower of blood and snake brains coming his way.

"Fuck!" Shane yelled as he gave the now-dead snake a good kick in the ribs.

"Calm down," Brent urged.

Shane turned his fury onto the feline. "Our only lead just blew his own fucking head off. For all we know, he could have had some information on where Trevor is."

Brent held out his palm in the peace gesture. “Maybe, but I doubt it. Going by this place, I’d say this is a low ranking gang. Certainly not the type that Orion would ever share sensitive information with. They probably haven’t even had a face-to-face meeting with the guy and instead, worked through Orion’s underlings.”

Before Shane could answer, chaos broke out as more felines stormed inside. What had to be at least two dozen, heavily armed men and woman soon filled the garage, a few of them curling up their lips at the sight of so many dead bodies. A couple of them let out low curses as they eyed Shane up like he was some sort of monster or something.

Even though they were all felines and technically on his side, waves of fear still sliced into Dalton. All the black uniforms and weapons brought back too many unhealthy memories – ones that involved pain and death.

He gave a soft cry of dismay as he cowered to the back of his cage so quickly his body slammed into the metal bars. *Stupid, coward! Way to show them how tough you are.* Dalton chastised himself, but still couldn’t stop his reaction any more than he could stop himself from drawing his knees to his chest again. He tucked in his head again as he silently waited for what would happen next. *Please, just let this nightmare be over.*

"Hey, Brent, what do you have there?" a soft, feminine voice asked.

"He hasn't told me his name yet, but he smells like a Lynx," Brent replied.

"The poor thing looks terrified."

Dalton lifted his head just enough to catch a peek. A small female with the same coloring as Brent knelt by Dalton. Reaching her fingers through the bars, she brushed a soft caress over his arm. "Hello, my name is Cassie. What's yours?"

"Dalton," he whispered in return, before tilting his face slightly in her direction.

She had a strange scent about her, something other than feline. His confusion must have shown on his face because she gave him a tender smile. "You're picking up the scent of Chris, my fiancé. He's a wolf, but don't let that put you off. He's actually almost tolerable once you get to know him."

His gaze scanned over the other felines, most of who were staring at him. He directed his face back down. He knew it made him look weak and cowardly, but then again, he was the one in the cage so he already fit that bill no matter how he acted.

"Why don't you come out of there?" Cassie urged.

"That's okay, I kind of like it in here," Dalton

lied.

She reached her fingers further inside and stroked his hair. "It's okay, I won't let anyone hurt you."

How Dalton wanted to believe that, but after so many weeks of pain, hunger and degradation, his mind was conditioned to expect otherwise. "Shane," he finally whispered.

Cassie blinked a few times before giving an understanding nod. "You want him to leave the room before you come out?"

"No, I want him to promise to stay. He'll protect me. Trevor promised."

At the word *Trevor*, all other conversation and activity halted. Cassie held up a hand to the others before turning back to Dalton. "Did you just say Trevor?"

Dalton nodded. "He told me that Shane would come to rescue us. That once he found us, the snakes wouldn't be able to hurt any of us anymore."

Shane walked over and crouched next to Cassie. Though Shane's eyes were so cold and devoid of emotion, Dalton felt no fear. Even with the lingering stench of death and blood still clinging to the feline.

"When did you see Trevor?" Shane demanded.

"Just a few days ago."

"So he's still alive then?" Shane asked, an edge

of desperation to his voice.

"Of course he is. Until I was sold, we had the same master. Besides, they wouldn't kill us, at least not yet."

"Why not?"

Dalton shook his head, bewildered the coalition didn't already know. "So they could use us for breeding, of course. You can't exactly knock up somebody if you're dead."

Cassie shook her head. "Why would snakes want to do that?"

"Because it's always easier to eat in rather than go out hunting for your food," Dalton replied simply.

Chapter Two

Trevor didn't know what god he'd pissed off, but he must have done something to end up on the wrong end of the karma meter. How else could he explain why he was presently playing Princess Leia to a Cobra version of Jabba the Hutt.

He pulled irritably at the chain around his neck as he resisted the urge to bite the Cobra shifter's ankles. So help him, if that bastard tried to fit him for a metal bikini, shock prod or not, Trevor was going to attack.

"This is a bit over dramatic. Even for you," Trevor spat at his capture.

The Cobra gave the chain a vicious tug, making Trevor see stars and gasp as he fought for breath. Damn, when would he ever learn to keep his trap shut?

"Watch your mouth, Panther, before I feed you to the Tarantula shifters," Orion warned through clenched teeth.

Orion nodded to one of his snake minions who stood behind a tripod. The snake nodded, then

turned the camera on.

"Filming ourselves are we?" Trevor couldn't resist quipping. "Isn't that a bit Bin Laden-ey?"

Orion reached down and grabbed a fistful of Trevor's hair. He pulled back until Trevor had no choice but to tilt his head back. The move exposed his throat in a show of submission that had his feline roaring in protest.

"You know, I've always wondered something?" the Cobra mused. "Why is it they call your kind Panthers? Aren't you really black North American Cougars?"

Trevor swallowed hard as his back began to burn in protest because of the awkward position. "Yes, we're Cougars by birth."

"Then why not just call you that?"

"Because, like with many other breeds of felines, there's always been a stigma attached to our black coloring. The only way Mitchell's father could get the rest of the Cougars to peaceably accept my kind into the coalition was on the condition that we'd be called Panthers."

"So you mean to tell me that you can't even go by your birthright because you were born different? That doesn't sound like a fair and just coalition to me," Orion crooned as he reached down to caress Trevor's cheek.

Trevor jerked back with a feline hiss, the chain biting into his already chaffed skin. "Mitchell is

fair. The only reason he continues to go along with it, even after his father's death, is because we agreed with him that it was the best way to keep peace."

"So Mitchell says, but you have to wonder. After all, he doesn't make Noah call himself something different just because he's a black Jaguar." A cunning smile curled over Orion's lips. "But then again, Noah is Mitchell's brother where you're just some stray that he took in out of pity."

"That's not true," Trevor argued, even as the beginnings of doubt began to fester. How many times had he told himself that same exact thing? "I'm a full-fledged member of the coalition and one of his soldiers, so I'm an asset."

"You say that, but we both know it's not true. All they see you for is a bit of fluff. A tramp who will only drag Shane down. They're not even looking for you."

Trevor shook his head, even as that doubt took root and began to grow. Deep down, he knew that Orion was only playing mind games, yet Trevor couldn't deny all the times he'd been called slut, whore or an easy lay. Most of those times had been since he'd joined the coalition, too. True, he'd done more than his fair share of sleeping around, but that didn't mean it still hadn't hurt.

Orion snapped his fingers. "I think Trevor needs something to help relax. He seems too tense

to me.”

Oh, God. No! Please, not again. I would rather die first. “No, please,” Trevor whimpered softly as he shrank back as far as the chain would allow.

A thin, tall man with dark, slicked-back hair stepped forward. With eyes so black, they appeared to have no pupils and red, thin lips, he almost looked like a cartoon version of a villain. He had an evil vibe that never failed to make Trevor shake in fear. Then he smiled and all thoughts of cartoons fled from Trevor’s mind.

How was it possible that a grin could look so threatening...scary...evil? Maybe it had to do with the pair of fangs that were hanging over the man’s bottom lip. As he moved closer, Trevor could even see droplets of venom forming at the tips of the freak’s choppers.

Trevor tried to struggle, but the man was too strong. Before Trevor could even utter a protest, he found himself pinned to the wall. Strong fingers curled into his hair and viciously tugged until Trevor had no choice but to tilt his head back to save from losing a portion of his scalp.

“Please...no,” Trevor whispered, hating himself for begging.

More than the upcoming pain and stupor that would follow, Trevor feared the way the venom made him act. He knew he wouldn’t be able to fight it and as soon as that toxin hit his

bloodstream, he would lose all his inhibitions and start acting like the slut everyone labeled him.

While he'd never gone so far as to fuck the spider shifter or any of the snakes, there was nothing Trevor feared more than him giving in and going all the way. To commit the ultimate betrayal to Shane. For then Trevor knew he'd never be able to go home to his mate. Not because Shane wouldn't take him back, but rather because Trevor would never be able to face the man he loved again.

Even though he expected it, Trevor still let out a yelp of pain as he felt the fangs pierce the flesh where his neck and shoulder met. After the spider got a good hold, more pain followed as the shifter's venom began to travel through Trevor's bloodstream.

He opened his mouth in a loud scream as wave after wave of burning agony rolled over his body. After what seemed like forever, the pain slowly ebbed away as warm pulses of pleasure took over.

Trevor let his eyes roll back into his head, a goofy laugh bubbling past his parched lips. If his cuffed hands had allowed it, he would have even reached behind so he could loop one hand around the spider's neck in order to hold him closer while he bit.

"Wow," Trevor breathed, his own voice sounding drawn out and distant.

“Does that feel good, Panther?” Orion demanded.

Trevor let out a throaty chuckle. “Not at first, but now it’s really nice.”

He arched his body back into the spider, smiling when he felt the man’s erection pressing into his ass. Some tiny part of him screamed the move was inappropriate and wrong, but that voice sounded so dim and insignificant, Trevor easily pushed it aside.

The spider took his fangs out and gave Trevor’s throat a long, lazy lick. “God, I would give anything to fuck you.”

“Okay,” Trevor moaned, the venom still pulsating through his body.

“Not going to happen, feline,” Orion snapped. “Wesley has a nasty habit of biting the heads off his lovers once he’s done with them, and I mean that literally. I need you alive for at least a little while longer.”

Trevor gave a whimper of frustration. He was so hard, so needy that it hurt. More so than just a normal unanswered hard-on, too. This ache burned so badly, he trembled from it. On its own record, his gaze shifted to Orion. “Then how about you?”

At that moment Trevor barely remembered that this man had torn him from the only one he ever loved. That the snake was the one responsible for

the chain now wrapped around his neck. Or that he hated Orion more than anything in the world. All that mattered was getting rid of the hunger that burned him.

Orion gave a sadistic smile. "No, half the fun is watching you suffer."

Trevor let out a cry of distress. Fine, he'd just handle it himself. He tried to reach down to stroke himself only to be reminded of his cuffed hands. The worst part was they had the cuffs attached to a belt around his waist so he could only move his hands a few inches, certainly not far enough to jack himself off.

"Not fair," Trevor whimpered as he continued to struggle against the bonds.

"Do you want to know what the other half of the fun is?" Orion asked.

Trevor shook his head, his gaze still directed on the cuffs. Surely there must be some way to work things so he could get to his aching cock? Maybe if he twisted his hands to the right...

Orion reached out, gripped Trevor by the chin and jerked his face toward the camera. "The other half is knowing that *he* is going to watch you suffer."

Another whimper slipped from Trevor, this one laced with shame. Now Shane would know that they'd all been right. That Trevor wasn't worthy. That he was nothing more than a used up fuck toy

who'd been cast aside by so many others.

That still didn't ease the arousal flooding Trevor. He let out a choked sob as he begged for something completely different, "Please, just kill me and get it over with. Finish me off before I betray him."

Orion grabbed Trevor's hair, cruelly pulling back so Trevor found himself once more looking into the damning lens of the camera. Leaning down so his lips were inches from Trevor's ear, Orion hissed, "Don't plead with me. Plead with him. Let him know how much pain you're in."

So Trevor did. Gazing into that cursed camera, he babbled, "I'm so sorry, Shane. I should have been stronger...better for you. Kevin was right when he told me to stay away from you."

"Who's Kevin?" Orion urged.

"A Panther. He and his partner, Jared, took in first me and then, later on, Shane. They taught us how to be part of the coalition."

"So, you and Shane lived there together then?"

Even though Trevor realized he was walking into a verbal trap in his dopy state, he couldn't avoid it. "No, once Shane came, they asked me to move away."

Orion shifted his fingers and began to stroke Trevor's hair in a manner one could almost call...caring? "They didn't want you anymore? Just like your foster parents when they kicked you

out when you turned eighteen.”

The whole situation was taking on a whole Clarice and Hannibal vibe, but damn if Trevor could put the brakes on. “Yes.”

“How did that make you feel?” Orion continued to caress Trevor’s hair and it took an oddly comforting feel to it.

“It hurt.” Trevor sucked in a breath. “Really bad. I thought they...” He trailed off as he swallowed several times.

“You thought they could be the family you never had. Brothers who understood what you were going through,” Orion supplied.

“Yeah,” Trevor nodded. Maybe Orion wasn’t all bad. After all, before then, nobody had really taken the effort to delve into Trevor’s feelings— not his old roommates, not Jared or Kevin and certainly not the rest of the coalition.

Trevor shifted his gaze up into Orion’s red-tinged eyes and confessed. “Kevin told me he didn’t want me to see Shane anymore. At first, I thought it was because Shane was a Leopard and that breed of felines is known to be a bit off.”

“That wasn’t the real reason though, was it?”

“No. Kevin didn’t think I was good enough for Shane. That I’d fucked around too much and that I’d end up hurting him.” Trevor blinked away the tears that were threatening to build.

Orion cupped Trevor’s cheek. “You would have

never done that though. I know better.”

Against all better sense, Trevor felt himself leaning into the touch. It felt so comforting and nurturing, something he couldn't remember not craving to be on the receiving end of. “I'm not bad.”

“No, you just want to be loved.”

Wow, Orion did understand him. Better than anyone ever had before. How was it that Mitchell and Shane could think this guy was so bad? He was almost nice. Much kinder than so many of the others from the coalition.

Trevor shook his head, trying to remind himself that Orion had also kidnapped him. Not just Trevor either, but numerous others. Trevor had lost count of all the feline captives he'd encountered in the past eight weeks. Not only that, but Orion had gone out of his way to dish added doses of humiliation to Trevor. First by making him sit on the ground like a trained dog and then by subjecting him to all the spider bites.

Still...Orion could be nice at times, too. Like right now. He even leaned down and placed a chaste kiss on top of Trevor's head.

“My poor Panther. Nobody understands him.”

Totally forgetting the camera continued to film everything, Trevor nodded. “Only you do, Orion.”

He then laid his cheek on the Cobra's knee and let out a contented sigh.

Chapter Three

Shane paced the width of the small examining room in the infirmary as he fought to keep his impatience in check. It proved to be one of the greatest tests to his discipline, however, because each tick from the clock served as a painful reminder that Trevor was still out there, waiting for Shane to rescue him.

Eight weeks, five days, thirteen hours and twenty-five minutes.

That's how long it'd been since Shane's world had collapsed.

If he lived for three hundred years, he still doubted he'd be able to forget the horror that'd slammed into him when he'd gone to Trevor's apartment. How he'd found the place in shambles, reeking of Cobra and fear. He couldn't forget that any more than he could forget the sight of the small puddle of blood already coagulating in the center of the small kitchen. It'd taken just one sniff for Shane to realize it belonged to his mate.

His mate. Trevor. The man Shane loved more than life itself. Now that he was gone and in danger, it felt as if a part of Shane had died.

In the meantime, the small, brat of a Lynx shifter couldn't look more relaxed. He sat, perched on the edge of an exam table, drinking milk through a straw. A frigging straw! Who did that besides little kids in kindergarten class? All that was missing were the graham crackers and the picture would be complete. The punk even swung his feet back and forth a few times as he surveyed his surroundings.

Shane wanted to go over and demand some answers from the Lynx. No, better yet, he wanted to grab Dalton by his adorable ankles and shake until those I'm-so-cute-I'm-puke-inducing doe eyes wobbled a bit.

As if sensing his thoughts, Brent stepped forward a bit, placing his body partially between Dalton and Shane. Shane let out a low snarl that grew louder as Dalton grinned at him. It wasn't a snarky or nasty smile, but rather what he'd seen cubs give a big brother or something. More so it was a grin that Shane never had directed his way, so to have it happen now confused him. Hadn't Dalton just seen him slice and dice his way through a nest of snakes? Most others would be trembling in fear of him, instead Dalton stared up at Shane with those cute-as-a-button eyes of his.

Shane curled his lip up. Great, just what he needed, a Lynx stalker who had a seriously displaced case of hero worship.

“When did you last see Trevor?” Brent asked Dalton.

Finally, they were getting down to business. Shane had wanted to start the questioning immediately, but the Jaguar siblings insisted on bringing Dalton back to the infirmary first. So now Shane found himself having to practice good manners, something he’d never been able to display even on his best day.

Dalton took one more sip before replying, “I spoke to him an hour before I was sold to my new master.”

Shane held in a sound of irritation. Getting a concrete response from Dalton was proving to be as difficult as washing an elephant with nothing more than a toothbrush. Brent didn’t appear flustered at all, but then again, the guy had half a billion brothers, plus one sister. Maybe that’s where he learned patience.

Giving an encouraging smile, Brent pressed, “Okay, so when did they sell you?”

The Lynx took another sip, the loud gurgling sound that came from a near empty drink filling the room. “About a week ago. That’s when I gave up hope.”

“Why? Was Trevor protecting you or

something?" Brent asked.

"Yeah, he kept away the more aggressive slaves. But it was more than that. He kept talking about how Shane would be coming to get him. So I figured if I stuck by Trevor's side, then maybe Shane wouldn't mind rescuing me, too." Dalton grinned up at Shane, much like a little kid would gaze at a rescuing fireman or something. Shane blinked a few times as genuine confusion hit him. Once again it hit him that nobody ever stared at him that way. He'd had terror-filled gazes, looks of loathing and more than a few tearstained ones. It reminded him a bit of the way Noah and Andrew looked at Mitchell or Brent from time-to-time. If he didn't know better, he would have sworn...

"Oh God! You actually have a big brother, hero worship thing going with Shane!" Brent exclaimed his eyes growing wide.

"But we're not related. We're not even the same breed of feline," Shane pointed out, still lost as to why the kid would want to latch on to him of all felines.

"I like Trevor, too," Dalton eagerly added.

A low growl rumbled in Shane's throat. "You should know that Trevor and I are mated and neither one of us likes to share."

Dalton shook his head, his dark hair flopping in his eyes. "I know that, silly. I just want you to

protect me and teach me how to be mean like you. You're funny when you get that grumpy look on your face."

Shane found himself speechless. The last time somebody other than the Jaguars or Trevor spoke to him that way had been a snarky Raven shifter. Shane had punched the guy so hard in the gut, the bird hadn't been able to say anything else for lack of breath. Not only that, but who in the hell used the word *silly* besides grade school children and teenage girls?

Brent stood up and jerked his head to the door. Shane followed him out, still shooting what-the-fuck-is-up-with-you looks at Dalton. Once they were out in the hall, Brent shut the door.

"Why are we leaving?" Shane demanded. "We haven't found out dick more than what we already knew before we found Dalton. We've already fucked around enough by taking him back here and making sure he had his milk and cookies. I'm not about to stand out here and twiddle my tail while he may have some information that can lead me to my mate."

"I understand. If it were my own mate, I'd feel the same way," Brent reassured.

Shane cocked his head to the side. "Then once again I have to ask, why the fuck are we on this side of the door?"

"Because I think that things may go better if

you go back in there and play nice with Dalton.”

Shane shook his head. Had the whole coalition started smoking catnip-laced dope or something? “Are you kidding me? Like I already told the brat, I have one mate and that’s all I want.”

“Relax, I don’t believe Dalton thinks of you or Trevor that way,” Brent assured him.

“I’m still confused,” Shane finally admitted. It was either that or punch something. That was even out since he’d promised Mitchell that he’d stop destroying coalition property. The Jaguar tended to get a bit cranky over constantly having to replace equipment and furniture.

“Several months ago, Orion wiped out a civilian Lynx family. I’m guessing that Dalton was the lone survivor from that attack,” Brent said.

Shane nodded, glad to finally have something to grasp onto. He recalled the day he’d been with Kevin and Jared when they’d answered the distress call the Lynx father sent out. Even though they’d arrived minutes after receiving the call, all they’d been met with was death and no sign of who may have been responsible. At that time, they had no way of knowing that would be the first of many snake-on-feline murders. Any more than they could have known that a Cobra shifter was leading the assaults.

“So you think he’s attached himself to Trevor much the same way strays often form makeshift

packs or coalitions," Shane surmised.

That made even more sense since both he and Trevor had belonged to two different rat-tag groups before they'd come to serve under Mitchell. Shane had grown up thinking of Andrew and Owen as brothers even though none of them were the same breed of felines. Trevor's group had been more eclectic. There had been a couple feline shifters, but their *family* had also included a Wolf, Hawk and Eagle.

"Yeah, which means he'll trust you enough to share all the details of his abduction, even the embarrassing ones," Brent stressed.

Shane let out a low hiss. "What the hell? Hasn't anybody clued this kid in that I'm the resident psycho? I'm not fit to be anybody's mentor."

Brent gave a sad smile. "No, the only one who talked to him about you is Trevor. As far as that Panther is concerned, you can do no wrong. So it only stands to reason that Dalton would think the same after listening to Trevor go on and on about you."

"Crap," Shane balled his hands into fists.

"Is having someone look up to you such a bad thing?" Brent demanded gently.

His Leopard sensed his unease and became restless. To work off some of the combined stress, Shane began to pace. "Hell, yes it's a bad thing. Do you want to know what I did last night?"

"Probably not."

Shane continued anyway. "I tracked some Coral Snake shifter down to a dive bar. When I got there, I beat the fucker within an inch of his life. When he still refused to tell me where Orion's lair was, I shot the guy in the kneecaps and then left him to suffer. Then on the way out, I dropped a grenade in the guy's car, just for shits and giggles. Now does that sound like the type of person *anyone* should look up to?"

The stupid Jaguar had the audacity to shrug. "Even if it makes sense or not, Dalton thinks you're the best thing since floggers and cherry flavored condoms."

Shane paused in his pacing, struck by Brent's choice of words and narrowed his eyes. "Has anyone ever told you that you have a fucked up thought process?"

"Every day of my life."

Shane ran a hand through his hair. "You know there's a reason why Leopards only have one child, instead of litters like the rest of the shifter breeds. We're not cut out for the whole family unit kind of thing."

"But you're still going to walk in there and make nice with Dalton, and you want to know why?"

"Because it's the only way to get Trevor back," Shane replied, shooting the closed door a dirty

look. Why in the hell did the stupid Lynx have to complicate things by getting all emotional and attached?

“That and because deep down you know he needs somebody to cling to. You can act mean and cold all you want, but I know you well enough to realize that you do have a heart. It’s just buried under ten tons of fury and crazy.”

“Remind me again why I haven’t killed you?” Not that Shane would ever cause Brent any harm. He respected Mitchell and all his siblings too much. It just was a teasing exchange he and Brent had often shared.

Right on cue, Brent’s lips twisted up into a grin. “Because who else would let you sign out the grenade launchers and machine guns from the armory?”

Shane gave a tight-lipped smile in return before he opened the door. Dalton turned around, his gaze so hopeful and hero-worshipy that Shane found himself at a loss at how to proceed. Killing. Maiming. Causing piss-inducing fear. Those were his specialties. Emotions on the other hand had always eluded him. Shane had always thought that part of him didn’t exist. That was until Trevor tripped into his life.

Trevor.

The name rolled through Shane’s mind and steeled his resolve. He could do this for his mate.

He *had* to do this. Because if he failed Trevor, Shane would never be able to forgive himself. More so, if Trevor died, Shane knew he'd soon follow. For life wouldn't be worth living without his Panther. He took a deep breath and put on what he hoped was a comforting expression.

"So are you hungry? Thirsty?" he asked, even though Cassie had already thrown half the cafeteria at the kid.

Dalton shook his head, a lock of his dark, spiky hair falling over his blue eyes. "No, I don't think I could stuff anything more in my gut."

Shane nodded as he took a couple of steps closer. Even though he could still sense the seconds ticking away, Shane forced himself to sound casual when he pressed on, "I was wondering if you could tell me something about the head snake who had you and Trevor."

"Oh, you mean Orion?" Dalton pulled a face. "I hated that asshole more than all of them combined."

A stab of pain hit Shane's heart at the sound of that name. "Why did you hate him the most?"

A shiver went through Dalton as his gaze grew haunted. "He's so mean. No...more than that, he's evil. So much so that he reeked of it. I mean all the snakes stunk, but Orion had his own special scent. I don't know how to describe it other than it was just off and terrified the hell out of me."

“You said that you and Trevor weren’t the only feline captives?”

“He had a lot of us. Actually, all the snakes do. Collecting felines seems to be the new in thing for them. Since Orion is the one controlling that part of the slave market, all the other snakes have become really protective and secretive about him. It’s kind of freaky, the whole culty worship thing they have for that creep.”

Shane’s mind coolly calculated how at many of the attacked feline homes they hadn’t found the remains of all the family members. They’d always just assumed those bodies had been consumed by the snakes. Now it was becoming clear that those missing felines had been taken for a whole different, yet equally disgusting reason.

“They wanted you to breed for them?” Shane asked.

Another shiver went through Dalton’s body. “Yeah.”

After a moment of silence, Shane realized that Dalton wasn’t going to elaborate on the topic so he decided to go down a different track. “Do you have any idea where they were holding you and Trevor?”

“All I could figure out was that it was in some huge underground system of tunnels. Almost like an old sewer or subway system. It had a whole *Teenage Mutant Turtle* vibe.”

Shane had never watched that show, but still got the gist of what Dalton referred to. "Can you recall anything else about it?"

"I don't know. They liked to keep us pretty isolated and never took us out of our cages. The only reason I got close to Trevor was because his cage was next to mine."

Fury ripped through Shane at the thought of his sweet, sassy mate being confined to what basically amounted to a dog's cage. "Did they keep Trevor locked up all the time?"

"No, Orion liked to take Trevor and show him off."

His heart seized in fear as he thought about all the things the twisted fuck of a snake could be doing to Trevor. "What..." for one of the few times in his life, Shane found himself having trouble getting words out. "What did he do to Trevor? Did he make him..."

Understanding passed over Dalton's face along with a soft blush. "No, Orion isn't into guys and nobody else has the balls to touch Trevor since he's considered Orion's property."

Relief flooded Shane until Dalton added, "They are pumping him full of drugs."

"Trevor or Orion?" Shane asked stupidly.

"Trevor. When they first brought him in, he fought them too much so they needed a way to calm him down." Dalton's fingers touched his

own neck in an unconscious gesture, his eyes getting that distant look again.

“What kinds of drugs? It has to be pretty potent to work on a shifter.”

“I’m not for sure, some weird kind of snake shifter carries it in his venom. All I do know for certain is that it hurts like fuck when he bites you and then after, it makes you...” Dalton glanced down at his hands as a blush stole over his cheeks again.

“Tell me it all,” Shane ordered, striving hard keep his tone soft.

“It makes you horny as hell. It’s so bad that it feels like agony.”

“I take it you’ve been doped up with it then?”

The blush grew deeper. “How in the hell do you think they got me to do a girl? I know most felines are supposed to be bi, but not me. Females have never done anything for me.”

Despite himself, Shane found himself reaching out to ruffle Dalton’s unruly hair. “Don’t feel too bad, I’ve always been the same way.”

Then a disturbing thought occurred to Shane. “If they’re not sexually abusing Trevor, why are they using the venom on him?”

There were many other tranquilizers that the snakes no doubt had at their disposal. Sure, they weren’t the fast acting, advanced kind that Shane’s foster brother, Owen, had developed, but over the

long run, they'd work just as well to keep Trevor cooperative.

Dalton darted a sympathetic glance up from under the fringe of his dark bangs. "Orion is doing it to torture Trevor. He knows that the only way to bring you down is to break your mate. The other thing is the drug is supposed to be highly addictive. They only used it on me once so I didn't get hooked, but with as many times as Trevor's been bit, he needs the venom. Otherwise, he gets really sick. Which by itself is a whole different fucked up torture."

Shane gripped the edge of the table as his world came crashing down around him. While the news wasn't exactly unexpected, hearing it aloud made it seem so real, so devastating. He let out a roar of fury as he turned and punched at the window, shattering it into a million pieces.

Chapter Four

Riley ducked his head and tried to make himself look as inconspicuous as possible while he walked through the feline compound. He just wanted to find his friends, Ranger and Noah, and get out of there before he was discovered.

The problem with being the only Eagle shifter in a coalition of Hawks and felines, was that he tended to draw attention no matter what he did. So he wasn't shocked that he didn't even make it halfway across the huge building before he was discovered. He was dismayed, however, by who'd done the discovering.

Colin. The Hawk shifter who'd made it a personal mission to make Riley's life a living, breathing, God-take-me-away hell. It didn't even matter anymore that Colin happened to be one of the sexiest guys Riley ever laid his peepers on. With short, dark hair, dark eyes and a build that would put any gay star to shame, Colin could have been Riley's dream guy.

That was until he opened his mouth. Then Riley always found himself cringing under an assault of rude, clipped, judgmental and general all around meanie-butt comments. In short, Colin found much at fault with Riley and he wasn't shy about sharing all those details.

"Where do you think you're going?" Colin demanded as he walked up.

Riley took in the all black uniform and boots that Colin had on and had to resist the urge to glance down at his own sadly lacking ensemble. While he'd opted not to wear his Mr. Eager Fuck tight, ripped jeans and favorite t-shirt with *What Boyfriend? I'm single!* on it he knew he looked anything but professional. His current jeans were hole free, but they were a tad snug. He smoothed a hand over his tight black Ke\$ha *Roar* shirt. While he'd dressed this morning he'd thought it'd be a hoot to wear something that had a gold jungle cat on it, now he felt stupid and a bit lame.

"I was just looking for Ranger and Noah. I wanted to know if they'd heard anything about Trevor," Riley rushed to explain.

As always, he found himself squirming under Colin's gaze. Riley found himself thankful the Hawk couldn't read thoughts. The last thing Riley needed was for the guy to realize how much he despised the man any more than he needed Colin to know that despite that hatred, Riley still

managed to have naughty, X-rated dreams about them being together. And how fucked up was that—having a boner for a guy that you couldn't stand. Riley would have laughed had the whole thing not been so soap opera like.

"You have a training session," Colin snapped.

Riley bit his bottom lip nervously, his teeth tugging on one of the two rings decorating that particular part of his body. That was just a couple of the many piercings he had, although a majority of them were hidden by his inappropriate clothing.

"I'm not supposed to report to you for training for another half hour," Riley reminded the Hawk.

"True, but every time you meet up with your buddies, you always lose track of time and end up being late."

"It won't happen this time. I set the alarm on my cell phone," Riley assured.

Colin just grabbed him by the front of the shirt and started to drag him to the training center. Since a couple previous, embarrassing incidents only proved it would be futile to fight back, Riley went along like some kind of trained puppy dog.

He did protest some. "I have another half hour."

"Just be quiet and keep up."

"Has anyone ever told you that you have terrible manners?"

They made it nearly to the large gym before Brent stopped them. Or rather, he hailed Colin. Since most of the other shifters tended to look at Riley as nothing more than a rare, novel pretty thing, they all lumped him into a too-dumb-to-converse category.

Colin stopped to talk, but still kept an iron grip on Riley's shirt. Really! Didn't that jerk have any respect for Ke\$ha? He probably didn't know *Tick Tock* from *Cannibal*. Riley tried to squirm away only to have Colin turn around long enough to pin him with a be-good-or-die glare. Since Riley knew how pissy the Hawk could be, he stilled. He did let out an aggravated sigh to show how stupid he found the whole situation.

"What can we do for you?" Colin asked.

It took Riley a few seconds to register that Colin had used the word *we*. That had to be a first. Usually when the other soldiers used it in conjunction to Riley it was more along the lines of *why don't we go someplace quiet so we can get to know each other better?* Or, *Why don't we find a closet so you suck me off.? I'd love to get lost in that pretty mouth of yours.*

Not that Riley had as much experience as say Trevor, but he did know that most guys found him attractive. The sad thing, however, was that seemed to be the only asset Riley had working for him.

"You may have heard that we just cleaned out a nest of Cottonmouths," Brent said.

"Yeah, since a few of my guys were on that mission, I've already been updated with the details. They can't stop talking about the Lynx who was found in a cage."

Riley piped up, "As in shifter? Wow, I didn't know there was that kind."

He immediately regretted speaking when he found himself the focus of Brent and Colin's stares. Riley bounced nervously from one foot to the other as he flashed a weak smile.

"Are you disappointed at the possibility that you may not be the only special and rare thing around anymore?" Colin demanded in a tight voice.

"Not at all," Riley replied adamantly. Colin already thought so little of him the last thing Riley wanted was for the Hawk to think he was vain as well. "I was just curious. Since I was raised by humans most of this stuff is still new to me."

"Lynx are pretty docile so they usually stay close to home and don't socialize much," Brent supplied.

"Oh, so is the one you rescued doing okay?"

"As well as one could expect given that he had to watch his family being slaughtered. That was before he spent the last several months at the mercy of the snakes. Right now, we have him in

the infirmary for a few days so he can heal up before we decide where to place him. It's going to have to be somebody pretty understanding. After spending so much time in the snake's company, Dalton is a bit skittish."

Riley shuddered. He couldn't imagine being in that position and it tore at his heart to think of Trevor being there even as they spoke. "Did the Lynx know anything about Trevor?"

Brent gave a slow nod, his expression suddenly guarded. "He said Trevor's still alive."

"What else aren't you telling me?" Riley demanded, his gut clenching in dread.

Brent hesitated.

Riley stepped forward and put a beseeching hand on the feline's arm. "Please, I need to know."

Colin and Brent exchanged glances before the feline said, "According to the Lynx, the Cobra in charge of the snakes has taken a personal interest in Trevor."

The room spun as Riley sucked in a breath. In his life, he hadn't had many friends, let alone a best buddy. That was until he'd met Trevor. "It's because of Shane, isn't it?"

"Yeah, since Shane was the assassin who Mitchell assigned to take out the Cobra, Orion has decided to make things personal. He's trying to break Trevor in order to get back at Shane."

Riley didn't respond, his chest too tight to

breath, let alone talk. He just nodded weakly as he put a hand to his stomach. Brent gave him a comforting pat on the shoulder before turning his attention back to Colin. "What I need is you and some of your Hawks to circle around the area where we found the Lynx. Maybe there were a few stragglers who were overlooked and they'll lead us back to Orion."

"I'll do it," Riley blurted.

"Out of the question," Colin snapped dismissively.

Normally Riley would have cringed under the tone, but this concerned Trevor and Riley wasn't about to let his friend down. "Why not? I know how to fly."

Well, he knew how to fly...kind of. He still was working out the kinks in that ability, but for Trevor, he'd be willing to give it a go.

"In case you forgot, there are still several slavers who would love to get their claws on you. An Eagle your age could bring them millions," Brent soothed in a much less bossy tone than Colin.

It still did little to dissuade Riley. If anything, he felt more determined than ever. "I'll fly in the center of the Hawks. I'm sure nobody will even notice me."

"No," Colin growled in his normal mean voice.

Riley should have been used to it. God knows

he'd heard it a million times in the past few weeks, but it still made him snap and finally lose it. "Who the fuck decided that you can tell me what I can and can't do?"

"Daniel," Colin replied simply as if that just explained it all away.

"So? He's the leader of the Hawks, not the Eagles so why in the hell should I listen to him?"

Colin stepped closer, really invading Riley's personal space. "In case you didn't get the memo, you ungrateful, little brat, there are no other Eagle shifters to be found. So we're all you have."

That comment stung because it was true, but damned if Riley would give Colin the satisfaction of knowing that. He curled his lip up into a soft snarl. "I don't need you, Daniel or any other frigging Hawk. I made it this far without you, so I don't see how you have any right to butt into my life now."

No sooner had those words left his trap than Colin growled and grabbed Riley by the front of the shirt again. "Excuse us, Brent, I have a little lesson to teach the brat."

"Maybe the brat is sick of you and your boring as crap lessons," Riley retorted as he fought to get free.

Then he realized the new direction Colin was headed and Riley's heart seized in fear. No! Anywhere but the roof! Riley began to struggle

harder, his tennis shoes making loud squeaking noises as they scabbled against the hardwood floors.

“You promised me that I wouldn’t have to go up there until next week,” Riley reminded Colin.

By then they’d attracted a small audience, most of them Hawks. More than a few of them wore knowing smirks, no doubt enjoying watching the Eagle being knocked down a couple pegs. Even though Riley should have felt angered or embarrassed about all the added attention, he was too busy being ball-numbing afraid. When they reached the door to the steps leading to the roof, Riley even went so pathetic as to grab onto the threshold to halt their progress.

“That was before it became obvious that you needed a reminder as to how lacking your flying abilities really are,” Colin retorted.

“Look, I’m sorry for mouthing off like that. I promise not to do it again,” Riley tried negotiating.

Colin wasn’t having any of it. After prying Riley’s fingers off the doorframe, the Hawk picked him up. Riley let out a yelp as he found himself face down over the Hawk’s shoulder.

“Knock it off, Colin,” Riley yelled as he wiggled in an effort to get down.

He was dimly aware they now had a bigger audience, but was beyond caring. All that

mattered was getting away before Colin got him onto that damn roof. He did let out another yelp of outrage when Colin gave his ass a firm slap.

"*Knock it off?* You know that sounds like some good advice. Maybe if I just booted your ass off the building, you'd learn to fly out of sheer desperation," Colin mused.

While he'd never gone through with the threat the twenty million other times he'd made it, that still didn't stop the cold sweat from breaking out over Riley's body. He took in a breath, not surprised to find it shuddering.

"You wouldn't do that. Besides, I managed to fly during our last lesson," Riley pointed out.

"Yeah, and you did great until you hit the line of trees. Then it was just you, a couple of a nests and one lonely kite—all trapped and helpless together."

Riley let out a growl of frustration. Colin would have to bring that up. "I'm sure I'll get better next time."

"You actually have to fly above twenty feet for it to count, Brat."

"Stop calling me that."

Colin kicked the door open at the top of the stairs and Riley's heart pounded hard as they stepped into the cool air brushing over the top of the four-story building. Colin didn't put Riley down until they were dangerously close to the

outskirts of the roof.

Riley gasped as he found himself inches from the edge and a fall that would at the very least leave a mark in the morning. Letting out a cry of distress, he backed up, but didn't make it far, his body slamming into Colin's massive chest.

"What's the matter? I thought you said you could do this?" Colin chided.

Never had Riley despised anyone more than he did Colin at that moment. Colin gave him a not so gentle shove forward and before he could stop himself, Riley reached behind and grabbed the Hawk's arms for support.

"I can. I just need to do my takeoff from solid ground," Riley rasped around a dry throat. He peeked a glance over the edge, his stomach lurching as the ground seemed to sway a bit.

"That form of takeoff doesn't work for new flyers. You don't have the skills yet. Hence the reason you ended up in the trees."

Riley tore his gaze away from the height long enough to glare at Colin. "I'll manage just fine." More so, he had to for Trevor's sake. After everything the Panther had done for him, Riley couldn't let his friend down.

Colin cocked his head to the side. "Then let's see you do it right now."

"I don't need to prove anything to you," Riley seethed.

Colin gave him first one, then a second and finally a third nudge. "Yeah, and you don't need any Hawks helping you. Riley can do it all on his own. He doesn't need help."

Riley started to retort, only to scream as the toe of his tennis shoe slipped over the edge. He jerked back, only this time, Colin wasn't there to stop him and Riley fell. He landed hard onto his ass before rolling to his side. Pain shot through his spine, but he ignored it as he crawled on all fours to the safety of the center of the roof.

He glanced down at his raw, scrapped hands and let out a choked sob. Damn it, he wouldn't give the damn Hawk the satisfaction of seeing him cry. It was bad enough that he already knew about Riley's near-paralyzing fear of heights. No sense in adding anything more to Colin's arsenal.

"Why are you being so stubborn about this?" Colin demanded. "I know you have your airhead moments, but this is a new low of stupid even for you."

It all became too much. Shame, worry, self-loathing and rage all collided inside Riley and made him lose control. "Because he saved me!"

Colin paused, blinking a few times before he asked, "What are you talking about?"

"Trevor rescued me from the Ravens."

"I don't get what you mean by that. If I recall correctly, we rescued both of you from a Raven

slave dealer."

Riley shook his head as he continued to stare down at his hands. They'd started to ooze blood. He wiped it away on his jeans before continuing, "I meant before that."

Colin shocked him by coming over and kneeling down so they were only inches apart. "Tell me about it."

"I was raised by a human foster mother so I had no clue as to what I really was. That was until the night a group of Ravens attacked. They spotted me walking home from school and followed me back to my apartment."

"School?" Colin echoed. "How old were you?"

"Seventeen. Don't worry though, I'm twenty now, so all those guys I've slept with since I got here aren't pervs or anything."

"God, I never realized how young you are." Colin cleared his throat before saying, "Keep going with your story."

"The Ravens broke into our apartment and my foster mom died trying to protect me. I ran away and, somehow by sheer dumb luck, managed to get away. Since I couldn't very well go to the police and tell them that giant birds attacked us, I hid out on the streets. Trevor found me sleeping in an abandoned building and took me back to the apartment that he shared with Ranger and the others."

"How long were you on the streets?"

"Three months." Riley picked a piece of dirt from his palm.

"How did you survive?"

Riley gave a laugh that sounded bitter even to his own ears. "What? You think that just because I have nothing more to offer than a cute ass and smile I used that to get by?"

Colin studied him closely, almost as if seeing him for the first time. "Well, did you?"

"No, I relied on panhandling and homeless shelters."

"That must have been hard."

"It was. By the time Trevor stumbled across me, I'd started to get desperate. I was so tired of being hungry and cold that..." Riley shook his head. "Let's just say I owe him everything."

"Are you in love with him?"

Riley jerked his head up, shocked. "No, it's not like that between us."

"So you never fooled around."

"Sure, we all did." Riley shrugged. "But it was casual buddy fucks, nothing more."

"But you're still willing to risk your life for him?"

Riley shrugged again, a heat going over his cheeks. "Well...yeah, pack sticks together."

Colin arched a brow. "Pack?"

"Ranger's the one who taught us that saying

and he's a wolf."

"I guess that makes sense then."

"So now do you understand why I have to go help find Trevor?" Riley reached out to put an imploring hand on Colin's arm, but remained mindful of the blood still oozing from his wounds.

"I really wish I could allow you to, but the answer is still no."

Disappointment crushed Riley because, despite his earlier boasts, he was fully aware he couldn't go off without the help of the Hawks. He bit his bottom lip before asking, "Why? You can go and watch my back."

"It wouldn't matter how many of us went with you, the risk would be too great. They'd love nothing more than to get you back." Colin reached out and gently grasped the back of Riley's neck. "Don't you remember how it felt that year they held you captive?"

Riley stilled, afraid if he moved, Colin would drop his touch. That wouldn't do because as soon as he'd felt the warm brush of Colin's fingers against his skin, he was hard pressed to recall he didn't like the Hawk.

"Of course I remember. It's not like one could forget something like that," Riley replied before he breathed in deep, taking in the scent of Colin.

The Hawk smelled wild, yet spicy at the same time and it sent Riley's heart racing, but this time

it was in a good way. There was also another smell underlining it, that of arousal. Riley sucked in a shocked gasp as he darted a look up into Colin's eyes.

Oh yeah, the Hawk was turned on. There was no mistaking the desire darkening the man's gaze. Riley nervously licked his lips before he leaned forward for a kiss.

Just as their mouths were about to touch, Colin put a hand in the center of Riley's chest and gently pushed him away.

"We can't do this," Colin declared in a rough voice.

Riley let out a whimper of disappointment. "Why not?"

"For one thing, I'm supposed to be your mentor."

Riley gave his best come-and-get-me grin, the one that had never failed him in the past. "I'm sure there are plenty of things you could teach me."

Colin shook his head and stood up. "Sorry, kiddo. We can't go down this path."

Stunned and a little hurt, Riley felt as if Colin had bitched slapped him, then called him Mary. "What harm can it do? It'll just be for fun." As soon as he saw the slight flicker of disgust go over Colin's eyes, Riley knew he'd blown things.

"That's another reason why? I don't do casual

fuck buddies.”

“Oh.” Riley looked back at his hands as shame filled him. God, why had he even thought that someone smart and mature like Colin could even be interested in someone like him? While everyone liked to go on and on about how special and rare he was because of the whole Eagle thing, in the end, all Riley had going for him was his looks and even those didn’t seem to interest Colin.

Colin walked over to the door, opened it, but made no move to leave. “I can’t let you stay up here, alone. It’s not safe.”

Riley repressed a snort. Yeah, wouldn’t want to risk someone snatching up the defenseless, airhead Eagle. It would be in bad form.

All Riley wanted to do was crawl to the darkest part of the roof so he could hide away from all the prying eyes while he licked his wounds. It looked like he wouldn’t even be getting that. With a heavy sigh, he pushed himself to his feet and made his way to the stairs.

As he walked by Colin, Riley refused to meet the other man’s gaze.

Chapter Five

The next evening, Shane only stopped by Headquarters long enough to grab some extra ammo for his guns. As usual, a tall overly thin, Lion shifter with greasy dreadlocks was behind the counter and for once, kept the conversation to a minimum. With the mood Shane was in, he didn't feel like answering the jerk's usual question of *How many kills did you get in last night? Boy, how is it that someone as small as you can take out so many big Ravens? I heard that you know how to kill somebody with just two fingers. Can you teach me?*

Shane swore that if the asshole asked him that last question one more time, he'd be getting a personal demonstration. Just as Shane was pocketing the ammo, the Lion cleared his throat.

"I heard that you still haven't found your mate. I'm really sorry about that, dude."

Shane resisted the urge to curl his lip up at the word *dude*. Seriously, who used that word anymore besides over-aged Valley girls desperate

to hold onto their childhood? Next he'd be yelling, *Gag me with a spoon.*

"Thanks" Shane replied shortly, hoping that would put an end to jabber-jaw's conversation.

Before the Lion could manage to come up with another teeth-grinding comment, Brent walked over. As soon as Shane got a good look at the Jaguar's face, he knew whatever news he'd be bringing wasn't going to be good. The only other time Shane had seen Brent this serious and uptight had been when someone had died.

It took every bit of the discipline that'd been beat into Shane for him to keep his composure. It worked...almost. Shane still found himself breathing a bit quicker as his heart thundered in his chest, each beat seeming to scream, *Don't be about Trevor. Don't be about Trevor. Don't be about Trevor.*

"We need you in Mitchell's office."

"When?"

"Now. A package was just delivered to you."

Shane shrugged and turned his attention back to his weapons. "Must be my order from *Amazon.*"

"Duuuuuuude...." the Lion drawled. "Did you order the book *A Hundred Ways to Kill Someone?*"

"No, because I wrote it," Shane replied in clipped tones. Inside, the adrenaline began to kick into high gear because there was no reason at all for somebody to be sending him anything unless

they were only doing it in order to fuck with him.

"No way! Really?" The Lion's eyes grew wide.

"Damn, Kit, don't be so damn gullible," Brent snapped before looking over at Shane. "Are you coming?"

Shane nodded and walked with Brent to their coalition leader's office. When Shane saw not only Mitchell, but the rest of his family and all of Trevor's friends, his heart sank. Now he knew without a doubt the package was somehow connected to his mate.

Mitchell gestured to a box. Long and rectangular in shape, it had already been neatly sliced open at the top. "I hope you don't mind. We needed to make sure it didn't contain anything that could harm the members of the coalition in it."

Shane found himself nodding again. He knew he should say something...react some other way, but he couldn't. All he could think of was Trevor and how he was so sweet and vulnerable compared to Orion.

My Panther doesn't stand a chance against Orion's sick games.

"What was inside it?" Shane demanded in a voice so harsh he hardly recognized it as his.

When Mitchell and Brent just exchanged looks, Shane felt his knees go weak. For a second, Shane's imagination went wild as he thought of

some of the demented things Orion could have sent via UPS. Shane even leaned forward and sniffed, slightly relieved when there was no scent of blood or flesh coming from the package. At least he wasn't playing the whole send-your-mate-back-in-pieces thing.

"It was a dozen red roses," Mitchell finally said.

"Oh," Shane replied as relief flooded through him. "I guess nobody ever told Orion that I much prefer daffodils." He tried to laugh at his own joke, but all that came out was a weak, wheezing sound. "Damn, Mitchell, don't keep me in suspense. I can tell by the way you and Brent are acting that Orion sent me something more than a bouquet."

Mitchell studied him for a few moments, the worry clear on the Jaguar's face. Finally he nodded and said, "There was also a video recording."

Shane closed his eyes as despair washed over him. If Orion sent him a video, it could only mean one thing, the snake wanted Shane to watch as his mate suffered. A strange sound filled the room, a series of soft whimpers. It took him a few minutes to realize it came from him.

God wasn't that rich? The Leopard who everyone feared and hated actually showing a moment of weakness. Shane couldn't help it because Trevor truly was his only weakness.

Orion knew that and now was using it to destroy Shane from the inside out.

Brent came over and clasped Shane on the shoulder. "Look, you don't have to watch it. Mitchell and I already viewed it so we can analyze it f without subjecting you do it, too."

"No I'll watch it. It's the least I can do. After all, I was the one who got him into this mess," Shane replied.

Mitchell moved closer and met Shane's gaze. "That's not true. I gave you the kill order, you were just doing what your leader asked."

"True, but I also taunted Orion. I enjoyed watching him squirm as I hunted him and the fucker knew it. Now he's going to make sure Trevor suffers ten times as much."

"You can't blame yourself for all this," Brent soothed.

Shane let out a low hiss. He needed to get a grip. If he lost it, then he wouldn't be any good for Trevor. Pulling on all his training, Shane forced himself to focus. "I'm not taking all the blame. Orion is just as responsible and that bastard isn't going to live long enough to regret his choices once I get ahold of him. Now if we're all done with our Oprah moment, can we watch the damn video?"

He saw the looks of shock and disgust flicker over Brent and Mitchell's face. They no doubt

thought that Shane was just being his typical, cold-hearted, Leopard self. He wondered what they would think if they knew that inside, he was slowly falling apart. That every night he clung to Trevor's pillow just so he could drink in what remained of his mate's scent.

Mitchell nodded to Owen who went over to the computer monitor and typed in a few keys. Soon an image flickered on the monitor that was mounted on the front wall of the room.

Shane's heart lurched as he saw his mate for the first time in eight weeks. Trevor was crouched on a dirty, white linoleum floor, a chain around his neck. Even though the image wasn't too clear, Shane could still make out how the makeshift collar had left his mate's neck red and chaffed.

Trevor wore a pair of cheap looking jeans and a white t-shirt that hung on his now overly thin frame. His normally immaculately styled dark hair hung in oily, hunks around his overly pale face.

Shane's heart broke a little more as he listened to the conversation between Trevor and Orion. Especially when he saw the moments of self-doubt that flickered across Trevor's face.

"Crap, this guy could work at Guantanamo, he's so good at physiological welfare," Ranger breathed, his face almost as pale as the on-screen version of Trevor.

Riley nodded as he wrapped his arms around

his stomach. "It's like he knows every one of Trevor's fears and worries and now is using them against him."

Heart hammering with fear, Shane curled his hands into fists as he continued to stare at the screen. When a dark-haired stranger approached Trevor and bit him in the neck, a loud snarl ripped from Shane.

The entire room seemed to hold their breath as they listened to Trevor's cries of pain. After what seemed like a lifetime of torture, the screams ended. The man kept his grip on Trevor for a few more minutes before pulling away. The next time there was good shot of Trevor's face, Shane let out another snarl. Trevor's normally bright green eyes were glazed over and unfocused and he had a vacant expression on his face.

"What is that?" Shane directed his question to Owen.

Since Owen knew poisons better than nearly anybody, he should have been able to figure out that one just by glancing at the attacker.

Owen shook his head as he squinted at the screen. "I have no idea. I know he's a spider, but I'll be fucked if I can tell you what kind. I've never come across anything that has venom that could affect a feline like that."

"Call Jade, she should be able to give us some answers," Shane ordered.

Jade was a Black Widow shifter and a good friend that went back to their days of illegal activity. She was also the only person alive who knew more about poisons and venom than Owen and that said a lot since the guy was a walking *Wikipedia* on the subject. Owen nodded before they all returned their attention back to the screen. When they got to the part where Trevor discussed his conversation with Kevin, they all turned to glare at the Panther.

Kevin at least had the good manners to look devastated and more than a bit guilty. The Panther ran a hand through his shaggy dark hair and sighed. "I know, I fucked up. I was planning on apologizing to Trevor when I got back from my mission, but Orion took him before I had a chance."

Andrew, who'd been standing next to Kevin, took several steps to the side.

Shane cocked a brow at the behavior.

Andrew shrugged. "I was just getting out of the splash zone. When you kick his ass, I don't want to get my last clean uniform messy."

Kevin locked gazes with Shane. The Panther's eyes were so full of remorse, Shane couldn't find it in him to lash out at the man. Kevin and his mate, Jared, were like brothers to Shane and Trevor. So damn if Shane could hurt the man, not when it looked like he was already doing a good job of

beating himself up over the situation. That still didn't mean that Shane was going to hold in his comments.

"He looks up to you," Shane said.

"I know," Kevin replied, his voice ragged.

"The only reason why he does some of the things he does is because he doesn't think anyone can ever love him." Shane noted a few open mouthed looks of shock because the Leopard could actually think deep thoughts. Well, fuck them. As far as Trevor went, Shane wasn't going to hold back. If they all wanted to throw mean and hurtful comments his way, so be it. He'd been battling hate since the day he was born and his own father wanted to kill him. Hell, Shane cut his teeth in verbal abuse. But he'd die before he let someone hurt his mate. Even if that somebody was one of the very few shifters Shane looked up to.

"Don't ever hurt him again," Shane said.

Kevin swallowed hard. "I won't. I promise."

That settled, Shane looked back at the screen, but the video had ended. It was frozen in a close up of Trevor. Before he realized what he was doing, Shane walked over and touched the image. His throat ached with the need to scream in frustration. Even his Jaguar was restless as it begged for release so it could find Trevor. He turned to Owen and Andrew. "Are you guys

ready?"

"Where are you going to search tonight?" Mitchell asked.

"I figured we'd go back to the local shifter bars and hangouts. Maybe somebody will have something for us this time." Shane patted his pockets absently. "I just need to stop by the armory and pick up a few things."

Brent gave him a concerned glance before saying in a gentle tone, "Shane, you already went to the armory. Remember?"

Shane blinked a few times, trying to focus, but all he could think of was Trevor and the way he'd looked on the damn video, the way he'd been chained like some dog, how...oh, God it just hurt so much to know that his mate was suffering.

"Are you sure you should be going out like this?" Brent asked, still using that soothing tone, as if afraid talking harder would make Shane freak out.

Andrew rubbed his palm down Shane's back. "He may be right. When's the last time you got any sleep?"

Shane glanced up and for once, didn't bother to hide his emotions. Whatever was stamped on his face must have been a doozy, too, because Andrew's eyes widened in shock.

"I'll rest when I get him back and not before. If it were your mate, you'd do the same."

Andrew studied him for a few moments before giving a slow nod. "Fine, we've got your back."

"Thanks," Shane whispered.

He pulled the hood of his cloak up and left the room. As promised, Andrew and Owen flanked him, Kevin and Jared brought up the rear. Shane realized for the first time just how lucky he was for them and his coalition. It was by their strength and support alone that he was able to keep it together.

Shane opened the door to Trevor's apartment and practically stumbled inside. After yet another night of fruitless searching, he had wanted to press on, but the others had insisted he take a break. At first, Shane had refused until Mitchell stepped in and made the request an order. Even then, Shane only agreed to a few hours rest before going back out.

Trevor's apartment was a small one-bedroom thing, but that still didn't stop Andrew, Owen, Kevin and Jared from piling in with him. Ever since they'd watched the video, they hadn't left Shane's side. If he'd allowed it, they would have even trailed him into the can.

"Bed," Jared ordered in clipped tones.

A Panther, he stood taller than his mate, Kevin. Jared also had more going in the muscle department, both of which meant he towered over

Shane. He didn't intimidate Shane in the least. Not only had Shane taken down guys a lot bigger, but he knew Jared may talk like he was tough, but under it all, he was an even bigger softie than Kevin.

"Only for a couple of hours, then I want to go to that park the Scorpion told us about," Shane argued.

"Yeah, because Scorpions have always been a source of reliable information," Andrew snorted. "We all know he was just saying anything to get you the hell away from him."

That was probably true since the small shifter nearly wet himself the instant he'd spotted Shane. That still didn't mean that Shane was going to overlook any lead, no matter how thin it may be.

Shane stumbled into the bedroom and climbed into the bed, boots and all. Grabbing Trevor's pillow, Shane brought it to his face and breathed in deep, seeking even the faintest scent of his man.

Owen and Andrew followed him in and sat on opposite sides of the bed.

"Jared and Kevin went back to their place to catch some sleep," Owen told him.

When Shane just nodded in response, Andrew asked, "You doing okay?"

"I can't smell him on me anyone," Shane said, still clutching the pillow. "I haven't been able to for weeks."

"We'll get him back," Andrew vowed as he ran a tentative hand over Shane's shoulder. As children, Edward, their foster father had never encouraged any form of affection so it still came hard for the three of them, even though they all now had mates.

"I put in a call to Jade. Once she's able to identify the spider shifter from the video, that may lead us in the right direction," Owen added.

"Edward would be so disappointed in me. I haven't made for a good Leopard," Shane confessed.

"Why? Because your mate was captured? That could have happened to any of us," Andrew soothed.

"No, because I was stupid enough let my emotions get the better of me. Edward always taught me not to care or feel. If I had followed his teachings, then Trevor would have never been targeted."

"If being a good Leopard means you have to be an emotionless robot, then you failed long before Trevor," Andrew said. When Shane just blinked in confusion, Andrew continued, "Do you think a true sociopath would have done things like offering to take our punishments as kids?"

"Nor would they have taken care of me when I accidentally got poisoned," Owen added.

"That incident happened years ago," Shane felt

compelled to point out.

"Yet, I still remember how you refused to leave my side, even if it meant having to clean up my puke," Owen replied with a weak smile.

"What we're trying to say is we always knew you cared about us. Even when you had to hide it."

They were silent for a few moments, Andrew rubbing his back while Shane continued to clutch the pillow. "I can't lose him."

"You won't. If it's the last thing we do, we'll get him back," Owen promised.

"If he dies, I'll become that horrible monster everyone really thinks I am. I won't be able to help it," Shane said.

Neither one of them responded. After another brief silence, Andrew and Owen laid down next to him. It made for a tight squeeze since a queen-sized bed just wasn't made to fit three full grown men, but nobody complained.

They curled together, like the makeshift littermates they were. They hadn't dared indulge in this comfort since they'd been very young because Edward strictly forbade it. Yet, as Owen and Andrew offered their warmth and comfort, it soothed Shane and, for the first time in eight weeks, he was able to sleep peacefully. Even if his heart continued to ache for Trevor.

Chapter Six

Shane woke up with a start, a snarl already slipping from his lips. Years of training had Andrew and then Owen waking up just as quickly. When they shot him questioning looks, he pointed to the window and mouthed, *We have company.*

Who? Andrew mouthed back, already pulling a gun from one of Shane's various hiding spots. This one happened to be behind a framed picture of Trevor's foster mother. If Shane had his say, they'd use the picture for target practice instead, but Trevor still was fond of the woman. Even after she let her husband kick Trevor out when he'd turned eighteen.

Shane lifted his face up and sniffed. *It smells like another Leopard.*

Even as he came to that conclusion, his own Leopard stirred in anger. There was a good reason why Leopard shifters didn't cohabitate. They were fiercely territorial and not generally known for

playing nice with each other. As such, Shane was the only one in the coalition, so there sure as hell shouldn't be one of the spotted fuckers sniffing at his door.

Shane grabbed the gun he always kept tucked under his pillow as Owen pulled another out of the nightstand. They all tensed and waited for the intruding Leopard to...softly knock on the door?

They all exchanged looks of confusion before Owen shrugged and left the bedroom.

"Where do you think you're going?" Shane hissed.

"To answer it," Owen replied with his trademark *duh* roll of his eyes.

"You just can't answer it. This isn't a bunch of Girl Scouts pimping Thin Mints," Shane snapped.

"I really wish it were though. Now I'm craving them." Andrew gave a vicious grin. "Thin Mints that is. Unlike the snakes, I don't eat humans."

The knocking sounded again, this time followed by a feminine sounding, "Helloooooooo... anyone home?"

Owen moved closer and Shane snapped, "Are you an idiot? You just can't open the door for any frigging Leopard."

"Yeah, because murderers always knock and announce their presence," Owen tossed over his shoulder drolly.

Shane flipped him off, but made sure to keep

his gun ready, just in case Owen got attacked. Although it would serve the smartass right if he did get nibbled on a bit.

Owen cautiously cracked the door open.

A petite blonde woman dressed in a long, flowing sundress beamed up at him. "And who might you be? I know you're not my Shane."

Her Shane? Andrew mouthed with a cocked brow,

Shane shot him a dark look before moving forward to stand behind Owen. "I'm Shane. Who the fuck are you and what in the hell do you want?"

The woman's smile never faltered. "Wow, you don't hold back, do you?"

Owen nodded. "We've always told him he needed to work on his people skills."

"The only problem is she," Shane tilted his head to the goofy blonde, "isn't human. She's a Leopard."

"Of course I am. What else did you expect your mother to be? A Panda?" She cocked her head to the side. "Although Pandas do make for good eating."

"As in fully animal pandas or shifters?" Owen asked carefully.

She shrugged. "Both. You take a meal where you can get it."

"Yeah, she's Shane's mother. After that

comment, there's no doubt," Andrew quipped.

"What are you doing here?" Shane demanded.

"Is it against the law for a mother to visit her only child?" she asked as she brushed past Owen and waltzed in the apartment like she was there for a weekly Sunday visit or something.

"Only if the last time said mother and child saw each other was over twenty years ago. Or maybe you don't remember that day. Here, let me refresh your memory. It's when you sold me to Edward," Shane snarled.

He didn't know whether to get pissed that she chose this moment to interject herself into his life or get annoyed because she was wasting valuable time. The fact that she seemed to be making herself at home and wasn't planning to leave anytime soon only irritated him.

"Gah! Bitter much?" She flopped down on the couch and curled her legs to the side.

"Do you have any idea what a bastard Edward was?" Shane demanded.

It wasn't lost on him that this wasn't one of those Oprah-style family reunions. If anything, his mother seemed as irritated about being in his presence as he was hers, which just showed that everyone had a point when they claimed Leopards have emotional issues.

"Yes, before I sold you to him, I'd tried to kill him myself on several different occasions." When

Shane just stared at her and didn't respond, she let out a huff of aggravation and threw her hands in the air. "It was certainly better than what would have happened had I let your father get to you. We all know he wanted you dead."

"Why didn't you just leave him and raise Shane yourself?" Owen demanded. Mom twirled a lock of blonde hair around one of her fingers. "Well, truth be told, I've never been that maternal. It was just as well Edward took you."

Shane let out a low hiss of displeasure. "Do you have any idea of some of the things that bastard did to us?"

All at once, it came back at him like a fist, the hours of forced confinement in the closet, the torturous sessions on the kneeling rack the countless beatings. He'd gone through all that just because she didn't have it in her to be a decent mother? If the whole situation hadn't been so fucked up, Shane would have given into a bout of hysterical laughter.

"So then why are you here now?" Shane demanded.

The sooner he got to the reason for her visit, the sooner he could get back to searching for Trevor. While she may be his birth mother, he had no desire to get to know her better. As far as he was concerned, she lost that privilege the day she sold him like some second-hand item on *Craig's List*.

“My new husband made me do it.”

Shane narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean *new*? Is Dad out of the picture?”

She made shooing motions with her hands. “Oh, him? I killed that asshole years ago.”

Of course, how stupid of Shane to think otherwise. It’s not like his folks were ever a candidate for the perfect American family. Shane may have felt for the older Leopard had it not been for the fact the guy had already tried to do him in. As far as Shane saw things, the karma was so perfect it was almost beautiful.

“Okay then, what does your new husband have to do with me?”

“He seems to think that I need to make amends for some of my past wrongs.” She rolled her eyes. “I guess that’s what you get when you hook up with an equine shifter. They have such stuffy and high morals. It’s actually kind of boring at times. I’d dump him if it weren’t for the fact that there’s a ton of validity behind the old statement.”

“What old statement?” Owen asked.

“You know...*hung like a horse.*”

Andrew stifled a laugh.

Owen just wrinkled his nose and muttered, “Gross.”

“Fine, you came and saw me. Now you can go back to your horse and tell him you’ve been a very good psycho bitch.” Shane gestured to the door.

"I haven't amended yet," she argued.

Shane pinched the bridge of this nose. He so did not need this now. He swore to himself that if his mother made him kill her, he'd never forgive her. "Fine, get to amending. Just make it quick because I have stuff to do."

"I know where your mate is."

All the air seemed to leave the room as the significance of those words descended on him. Shane studied her face closely in an attempt to determine if she was fucking with him, but she looked as bored as ever.

Finally, she did give him an expression—chastisement. "Falling in love? Really, Shane? I would have expected better from you."

"I don't expect you to understand," Shane replied stiffly.

Damn, his mother was so cold and evil that nothing Hollywood could create would even compete. Dear God, is this how he came across to the coalition? If so, it's a wonder that Trevor even looked at him with anything other than revulsion.

"Where's Trevor?" Shane asked, hoping he didn't sound as desperate as he felt. In truth, he'd get down on his knees and beg at her feet if that's what it took.

"In Holland," she replied.

"As in the country?" Andrew interjected.

"No, as in the city," she said.

"There's a city named Holland a few hours from here," Owen supplied.

"And that's where the snakes are all holed up." She gave a shiver. "They're really disgusting things."

"How so?" Andrew demanded as he shot daggers at the woman.

While Andrew didn't have nearly as many kills as Shane, he was far from a kitten, too. At that moment, Shane realized that Andrew would have loved nothing more than to be able to have a piece of his mother. Had there been more time, Shane may have been tempted to let him.

She shot Andrew and icy glare. "Because they never bother to cook their meat before they eat it." She turned back to Shane. "Now, do you want to know where that mate of yours is or not?"

* * * *

Trevor whimpered softly as he curled into a tight ball in a pathetic effort to get warm. His thin jeans and t-shirt did little to ward off the chill from the underground room and they'd never bothered to give him a blanket.

Other tremors played havoc on his body, these having to little do with the temperature. At the same time, his stomach rolled violently. He clenched his teeth together. Since they gave him

too little to eat as it was, he'd be damned if he'd waste it by puking it back up.

All around him were other cages, just as small as his. They were stacked two high in some areas and circled a room that rivaled the coalition garage in size. Nearly all of the cages were full. Mostly by other feline shifters, but there were a few wolves and even a couple Hawks mixed in. Trevor guessed that maybe the snakes liked some variety with their meals.

His gaze landed on one cage, this one empty. It'd belonged to Dalton, an overly-chatty, clingy Lynx that Trevor had grown fond of. His chest constricted painfully as he wondered what could have happened to the poor kid. While he doubted they'd kill Dalton since Lynx were so hard to find, that didn't mean that the feline couldn't still be suffering under the hands of his new masters.

Another wave of nausea hit Trevor, followed by another round of trembling. He gritted his teeth to hold in a groan of agony. How was it his body could feel like it was on fire and cold at the same time? He couldn't remember a time when he'd been in so much pain.

The real sick twist was he knew exactly what it would take to make him feel better. That damn spider, Wesley. One bite from the fucker and Trevor would be flying again. Of course that would also mean that he'd have to grovel at

Orion's feet at the same time, but it would be worth it just to have some reprieve.

"No!" Trevor shouted.

Pain or not, he couldn't give the snake that satisfaction. Maybe a couple years ago Trevor may have been that weak, but now he was a trained soldier. Not only that, but he didn't want to give Orion a chance to make another one of his damn videos. The Cobra gloated over how he'd sent the previous one to Shane. So Trevor would be damned if he'd allow Orion to use him as a weapon against his own mate once more.

Trevor focused on the one thing that could make the pain a bit more tolerable – Shane. Taking a deep cleansing breath, Trevor closed his eyes and brought forth an image of his mate. He forced himself to recall the soft way that Shane smiled for him alone. Or how Shane had a wonderful sense of humor, even if Trevor was the only one who could see that. Or the way it'd felt to be held in Shane's arms. Most of all, Trevor remembered how wonderful it'd felt to hear Shane say, *I love you, Panther.*

"I love you, too," Trevor whispered, although Shane wasn't there to hear it. "I just need you to come get me soon. I don't know how much longer I can last."

No sooner had those words left his mouth than waves of agony rolled over his body. This time he

couldn't hold in the groans any more than he could hold in the screams of pain that soon followed. The entire time he prayed for death, but at the same time, he hoped he'd live. If for nothing else than at least to be able to gaze at Shane for one last time.

Chapter Eight

Colin led Riley to the east side of headquarters. As always, whenever Riley went to the Hawk area of the building, he felt almost at home and a little bit lighter. Maybe because it had been specifically designed to appeal to bird shifters. Riley had been told that shortly after Daniel and his Hawks joined the coalition, Mitchell gave them the section to use as they saw fit. Since then, they'd been slowly converting things to their liking.

Instead of the warm, lawyer's office feeling of the rest of the place, the walls were painted various shades of green and browns. The floors had thick, brown carpeting and there were several large, soft couches scattered throughout the many offices and meeting rooms.

The best part, in Riley's opinion, was the big rec room. Not only did it have a huge, flat screen TV, but a pool table and enough video games to make a twenty-year old man cream his pants. He could

have spent hours in there if it weren't for Colin always forcing him into never ending training sessions.

When they stopped in front of the rec room, Riley felt a jolt of shock. Colin turned and pointed a finger at Riley's chest. "I have a meeting with my brother. It should only take a few minutes and then I'll take you into the gym for some sparring."

Sparring—oh yippie! Riley could hardly wait. Cue sarcasm.

"Okay," Riley shrugged, trying hard not to let his dismay show. He still carried numerous bruises from his last *lesson*.

"Go wait in the rec room. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Riley turned to do as ordered, but pulled up short when Colin put a hand on his shoulder. "Watch TV. Read a book. Play some pool. Just don't get into any trouble."

"Why would you think I'd get into trouble?" Riley demanded, a little indignant.

Shit, hadn't he done nearly everything Colin ordered him to? He'd been showing up for the damn Hawk's training sessions, plus Riley had been a good little Eagle and not gone out, which had been hard since he loved to mingle in the crowds at clubs and stuff. He'd resisted since everyone seemed to believe that boogie monsters were just waiting to get their hands on him. It

hadn't been easy either, some days Riley felt like screaming from boredom.

Colin's face grew stony. "Kid, you're nothing but trouble."

"I wish. I'd give anything for a bit of diversion right now." Riley sighed.

"This should only take me twenty minutes and then we can go work out. That should make you feel better."

Riley rolled his eyes. "Only you would think that. I much prefer other sweat-inducing activities."

"Just go and for once, behave."

Colin gave him a shove in the right direction before stalking off to Daniel's office. Riley glared at the man's retreating back, resisting the childish urge to flip the Hawk off. He waited until Colin had entered the office before ducking into the rec room.

The place was empty save for Drew and Greg, a set of identical twins. Riley smiled softly as he took in their dark, glossy hair, sleek builds and full lips. Maybe the next twenty minutes wouldn't be so boring after all. He'd heard on several occasions that the twins loved to have a good time.

"Hi," Riley said, throwing on his best flirtatious smile.

"Hey," Drew grunted in return.

Neither one of them glanced up from their game. Well, that wouldn't do at all Riley decided. He went over to the sound system and scrolled through until he found *Peacock* by Katy Perry. A triumphant grin came over his face. That would do perfectly. Thank the gods for Katy and her naught lyrics, with her help he'd soon have the twins eating out of the palm of his hand.

He turned the music on, making sure the volume was nice and loud. Then, while still facing the sound system, Riley began to dance. He used all his best come-and-fuck me moves that he had in his arsenal, not playing shy at all. He even went so far as to run his hands over his hardening cock so he could rub off a bit.

While the twins had yet to say anything, Riley still knew they were enjoying the show. Not only could he feel their gazes burning into him, but he could smell the desire rolling off them. Riley darted a quick glance his shoulder, his cock jerking in excitement when he saw the lustful looks on the men's faces.

After giving them a few more minutes to enjoy his ass shaking skills, Riley turned around to face them. Still moving in time to the music, he ran his hands over his crotch again, pausing long enough to undo the top button of his jeans.

He'd worn his favorite and tightest tops, a red t-shirt that barely reached the waistband of his

jeans. He lifted the hem up just enough to show off a bit of his abs.

The twins continued to stare at him, their eyes dark with lust, but otherwise they didn't speak or move. Deciding that maybe they need a bit more motivation, Riley crooked a finger at them.

"In case you two haven't noticed, this is an invitation to fuck me stupid," Riley said as he lifted his shirt over his head and tossed it aside.

The twins shared a smile before they tossed down the cue sticks and advanced.

* * * *

Colin squirmed in the leather chair and tried to concentrate on whatever it was Daniel was rambling on about. Damn if he couldn't get his mind off Riley long enough to focus on anything other than the bratty Eagle. No matter how hard he tried, all he could think back to was the previous day on the roof.

When he'd seen the hurt on Riley's face after rejecting the kiss, it'd nearly torn him apart. While Riley could be annoying, spoiled and immature at times, deep down Colin really did have a soft spot for the brat. To know that he'd caused Riley any discomfort made Colin want to apologize.

The thing was that Colin had never been good at apologizing. Frankly, he'd never been good at

dealing with others period. His gruff, hard nature tended to turn people off. As such, they generally avoided him and he was more than happy to return the favor.

The problem with Riley was that Colin couldn't avoid him. Since Daniel had assigned him the role of Riley's mentor, Colin had no choice but to come into contact with the Eagle for several hours every day.

It didn't help his situation that lately Colin had been having dreams—dreams that no good mentor should ever be having about their students. Just the previous night, he'd dreamt that he and Riley were in a hot tub together. They were outdoors and heavy, thick flakes of snow were falling. Some of them had clung to Riley's long lashes and Colin had slowly kissed them away before moving his lips to other areas of the Eagle's sensual body. Then Riley—

"Colin! Are you even listening to me?" Daniel's hard voice broke in.

Colin jerked in surprise, shooting his brother an apologetic smile. "Sorry, I didn't get much sleep last night and I'm still out of it."

"Well, then it's just as well that you're not going on the mission tonight," Daniel replied, running a hand through his thick brown hair.

"There's a mission tonight?"

"Damn, did you listen to anything I just told

you?"

"Maybe?" Colin hedged as he resisted the urge to squirm in his seat like some naughty schoolboy.

"The felines think they may have not only located Trevor, but several other captives, some of which are rumored to be Hawks. So we're going with one of Mitchell's better teams to extract the prisoners."

"Where are they being held?"

"On the grounds of what used to be a zoo. The facility was closed down several years ago and the snakes started living there shortly thereafter. Or more precisely, they've been living *under* it. The zoo had a series of underground tunnels and storage spaces and we think that's where the snakes set up their main operation."

"So you mean to tell me that their keeping fellow shifters captive in a zoo? Don't they realize how cliché that is?"

Daniel chuckled. "My guess is they don't care."

"So why are you leaving me behind? Not to be vain, but I'm one of the best fighters you have."

"Because you already have an assignment and that's keeping an eye on Riley."

"Since when did that become a twenty-four hour gig?"

"Since we're moving Riley from the family we placed him with."

"Why, have they been treating him bad or

something?" That question came out much sharper than Colin meant it to.

"No, but word on the street is the price for his capture has jumped by nearly a million dollars."

"Let them get him. After a few hours of listening to his chatter, they'll be paying us to take him back," Colin drawled, even as his heart skipped a few beats.

He frowned to himself. If he didn't know better, he'd almost say he felt protective of the little brat. Which was crazy, since he couldn't stand the punk. Well, maybe sometimes he was okay when he actually managed to keep his mouth shut for more than a ten second stretch.

A loud knock interrupted the meeting before another Hawk, Garrett, stuck his head in the door. "Sorry, to interrupt, Daniel. I just thought you should know the twins are at it again."

Daniel let out a low groan as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "Crap, when are those guys going to learn to keep it in their pants while out in public?"

"Give them a break," Colin chastised softly. "This is our part of the building so it's not that public. Besides, think of how it was back when Dad was in charge. Public sex acts were part of rituals and everyday customs."

"That was then. Things are different now."

Colin snorted. "Why? Because we're making

nice with the felines now? What's the big deal? So, Greg and Drew like to have fun on the back patio from time to time."

"Oh, there not on the patio. They're in the rec room," Garrett said.

Rec room? Colin's blood ran cold. No, surely Riley wouldn't be that impulsive.

"And they have the Eagle with them, too," Garrett added.

Shit! He would be that impulsive.

Colin sprang to his feet and made a beeline to the rec room, Daniel and Garrett on his heels. When Colin got there, he wasn't too surprise to see a large group already gathered. Pushing his way to the front, he stopped dead in his tracks at the sight that greeted him.

Riley was on all fours on the coffee table, without a stitch of clothing on. Greg was plowing into the Eagle's ass while Riley sucked Drew off. Neither one of the Hawks were being gentle either. Greg kept giving Riley's ass sharp slaps, while Greg tugged ruthlessly at the younger man's blond hair.

Colin started to step forward to help until he noticed that Riley was smiling. Well as much as one could smile with a mouthful of dick. Not only that, but Riley's cock was fully erect and leaking droplets of precum.

The little brat actually enjoyed playing rough.

One of the Hawks that served on his team spotted him watching and said, "You should have seen it a few minutes ago. The twins had the Eagle nearly bent in half. One twin rimmed the Eagle while the other sucked him off. Blondie there sure does let out some beautiful moans.

Colin's gut churned as he continued to watch the show. Damn, the twins just used Riley like he was a warm, breathing sex toy and nothing more. There was no caressing or kissing, just hard, unapologetic fucking.

Greg threw back his head and roared as he came. No sooner had he finished, then Drew grabbed Riley and all but threw him on top of a nearby pool table. Riley landed on his back, a loud gasp bursting from his swollen lips.

"You have the best ass," Drew praised right before he thrust inside Riley.

"Do you still think it's harmless fun?" Daniel asked as he came up next to Colin.

"He's just a kid," Colin protested, even though the sweat-slicked muscles covering Riley's body belayed that statement.

"He's old enough to consent," Daniel pointed out.

"Are you kidding? I don't give a fuck what his age he is, mentally he's not street smart enough to be playing around like that."

Colin found himself riveted on Riley's face. He

looked as if he were seconds from coming and Colin had never seen anything hotter. Riley's plump lips were parted like they were begging for a kiss and his eyes dark with passion.

Riley shifted his head to the side and Colin found himself locked in the Eagle's heated gaze. Despite his earlier denials of not wanting to be with Riley, Colin felt a wave of desire slam into him. It burned hot and made him want to shove the twins away so he could have a sample of the sweet looking body.

He took in a deep steadying breath as he shook his head. No, he shouldn't even be thinking like that. As Riley's mentor, he had no business thinking of his charge that way. Giving himself a mental tongue lashing for not having better control over his desires, Colin turned forced himself to walk away.

He couldn't escape the sounds of Riley's passion that easily. They followed him all the way down the hallway.

Chapter Nine

As Shane approached the remains of the zoo, he could sense most of his team shift into their animals. Shane stayed in his human form. Since this mission was personal, he wanted the kill to be personal, too. The only way he could accomplish that would be if he faced Orion man-to-man.

Andrew and Owen stayed in their human forms as well. They walked up and as always, flanked him.

"I managed to get in touch with Jade," Owen said.

"Did she have any idea what could have been the spider who bit Trevor?"

"Yeah, and it sure shocked the shit out of me."

Shane gestured with his hands. "Well, don't keep me in suspense. What is that fucker?"

"*Eoplectreurys gertschi*," Owen announced with great zeal. When Shane just shrugged, the excitement fled Owen's face. "I can't believe you've never heard of them. They're only one of

the oldest known species of spiders. They're extinct in the wild, but somehow their shifter counterpart managed to survive. Although they think Wesley is the last of his kind."

"Did you just say the sider's name is Wesley?" Andrew pulled a face.

"Yeah, and Jade was really pissed to find out he was still breathing. She thought she'd killed him in a house fire over a year ago."

"And that's why spiders like her never make for good assassins. They never have the patience to stick around to make sure the job is done properly," Shane pointed out.

A large explosion ripped through the air before a tan abandoned snack stand went up into flames. Shane checked his gun one last time before smiling at his foster brothers. "That's our signal. Let's go nail that Cobra and get Trevor back."

Intel had told them that the least guarded entrance to the underground lair was toward the center of the park so Shane ran in that direction. Along the way, a couple of Snakes in human form jumped out at him. Shane didn't even have to waste any time taking them down because Owen and Andrew did it for him.

Around him, he could hear snarls, hissing, roaring and cursing as the rest of his team took out the snakes guarding the entrance. Shane ignored all those battles. The only thing that

mattered was reaching that opening so he could get to Trevor.

They finally reached what looked like a set of doors leading to a storm cellar. While Andrew and Shane held their guns at the ready, Owen cautiously open them up.

Owen and Andrew's mates joined them and the five men peered down into the opening. A pair or rickety, metal steps led down into what looked like a dark abyss. Shane tensed, waiting for something to jump and attack, but after a few breaths, realized that nothing was coming for them—yet.

"I'll go first. I think it's my turn anyway," Andrew offered.

In the past, whenever they'd gone on missions together, Andrew and Shane always swapped who would take point. Before Andrew could reach the opening, his mate, Vapor, stepped forward. A dark-haired hulk of a man, he towered over Andrew.

"Like hell you are," Vapor growled protectively. "I'll go first."

With all of his training, Andrew could have handled just about anything that came his way, but he still stepped back and let Vapor take over. The tender way the two acted toward each other only made Shane miss Trevor more.

With Vapor leading, they slowly, one-by-one,

went down the stairs. As soon as he put his foot on the first metal rung, the overwhelming stench of snake, feces and decay assaulted him. As he descended, he could hear Owen gagging from above him. Any other time, Shane would have teased him about having a delicate nose. Instead Shane focused all his energy on breathing shallow so he didn't join Owen in his gag-fest. Somehow he didn't think that would impress or put the fear of god into the snake shifters.

Once he reached the bottom, Shane quickly scanned the area, trying to glean as much information as possible from his surroundings. While the walls looked dated with cracks running through the crumbling concrete, the lights and floor looked to have recently been installed. Shane would be willing to bet the snakes had been planning on sticking around for a while and were gradually making improvements to their new home.

Too bad for them Shane planned on blowing up the entire operation. He just needed to get Trevor and the rest of the captives out first. This time he insisted on taking point as they made their way down hallway. It was silent, save for a constant dripping noise and Shane wondered why in the hell the snakes hadn't called in for a plumber the same time they did the flooring.

He was just about to send that question

telepathically to Andrew when a tall man stepped out from a doorway and challenged them. Bigger than even Vapor, the guy had a bald head and an the unmistakable sharp facial features that marked most spider shifters.

"Tarantula," Owen muttered under his breath.

The spider clenched his hands into tight fists and sneered at them. "I'm going to love crushing open your skulls so I can suck—"

Shane brought up a gun and shot the jabber-jaw in the head.

The man fell to the ground, his mouth still parted in speech.

"Well damn, now we're never going to know what he was going to suck," Owen mused.

When the group gave him droll stares, Owen shrugged, "So kill me, I'm curious."

They didn't run into anybody else as they made their way down the long hallway. Then again, that could be because most of the snakes had rushed outside to fight off the other felines and Hawks. So when they reached a big room and only found, Orion, a few guards and Trevor, Shane wasn't too surprised.

He was stunned at his mate's appearance. Trevor's eyes were glazed, the pupils so dilated the green was nearly absent.

Cheap looking, dirty clothes hung on Trevor's gaunt frame. His once beautiful dark hair looked

dirty and stark against his overly pale face.

Shane waited for Trevor to glance his way, or some flicker of recognition, but the Panther continued to stare forward. A thin line of drool fell from his mouth and he made no move to wipe it away.

Shane snarled and directed his glare at Orion. Unlike the other snakes, the Cobra didn't have that whole stuck-in-between-shifts going on. If anything, he would be considered good looking with his carefully styled blond hair and high cheekbones. He even dressed with sex on the mind, wearing a dark red silk shirt with black pants.

The man's appearance didn't fool Shane in the least. He knew that out of all of them, Orion was the meanest and ugliest snake of them all. Shane also knew that he was going to be a bitch to kill.

One thing Shane did have going for him was he'd taken some time to study Cobra shifters and he'd learned their one weak spot – the area behind their necks. Now all Shane had to do was get close enough and he could deal a deadly strike.

"I've been waiting for you." Orion smiled wickedly.

"I'll bet you have. You probably don't get much action otherwise," Shane replied in his coolest voice. It was a tone he mastered years ago that never failed to unsettle his opponents.

Orion blinked once, but his grin never faltered. "Did you miss your pet? I promise that I took very good care of him."

The Cobra gave Trevor's chain a vicious tug. Trevor let out a soft grunt before he fell to his side, obviously too doped up to keep his balance.

Shane let out a soft snarl, but otherwise didn't react. He knew everything was just a ruse to get him off his game so Orion could take him down. "Why don't you let Trevor go and we can finish this?" Shane offered.

When Orion shook his head in denial, Shane wasn't too surprised. "Nah, I think I'll keep him right here for now. When I kill you, I think I'll make him watch while I eat my dinner."

They all jumped when Trevor gave out a throaty, slurry-sounding laugh. He got back on his knees and swayed a bit before directing a blurry gaze at Orion. "You fucking idiot."

"What did you just call me?" Orion demanded, his eyes briefly flaring to red.

Trevor let out another burst of laughter. "I called you an idiot because that's what you are if you think you can beat Shane. He's going to rip your fingers off one-by-one and then feed them to you, just for touching what belongs to him."

Vapor let out a low whistle. "Wow, Shane's rubbed off on him. He sounds down right psychotic."

Trevor gave Vapor a goofy grin, then turned and bit Orion in the leg. And by bite, he went all caveman and did it with his blunt human teeth instead of his sharp feline ones. It still must have hurt like a mother fucker because Orion let out a loud yelp of pain before kicking Trevor away.

Trevor made a futile attempt to crawl away, only to be drawn up by the chain. He let out a gagging sound as his finger clawed at the makeshift collar around his neck.

The sign of his mate in pain and struggling snapped the last bit of Shane's reserve. Letting out a roar, he exchanged his gun for his twin short blades.

By the time Orion could react, Shane was already on him. That didn't mean the battle was quick and easy. Far from it. Orion managed to pull out his own set of swords and displayed amazing skill with the weapons.

Unfortunately for the snake, Shane was better. He soon had the snake cornered. Orion swung his right hand around and Shane countered, his blade slicing through the snake's wrist.

Orion let out a shriek as he looked down at the stump where his hand used to be. Shane smiled. Perfect, now the bastard would only have two choices, shift or die. Orion gave him one last sneer before he began to shift.

A shimmering, silver light pulsed over the

snake's body, the illumination so bright, it temporarily blinded Shane. He blinked a couple of times to clear his vision just in time to spot the end of Orion's transformation.

In Cobra form, Orion had to be well over twenty feet long. It opened its mouth to reveal foot long fangs that dripped with spittle and God knows what else. Damn, not even Jon Voit would want to tangle with that thing. Only a fool would challenge something so big. But then again, they'd always accused Shane of being crazy, why buck the trend now.

"Now it's time for you to feel a little pain," Shane snarled before he plunged the blade at the top of the spin.

Orion let out an unhuman sounding shriek as he began to writhe around violently. His tail thrashed around, almost hitting them a couple of times. Not wanting Trevor to get hurt any more than he already was, Shane dove for his mate. It took both him and Andrew, but they managed to get rid of the chain around Trevor's neck. Gathering Trevor into his arms, Shane took cover behind a countertop. He spotted the other felines doing the same.

Once they were safely out of the way of Orion's death throes, Shane allowed himself to relish that he finally had his mate safe in his embrace. Shane held onto Trevor tight as he rained kisses down

his face.

"I take it you missed me," Trevor quipped, his voice still slurred.

In the center of the room, things grew quiet as Orion's thrashing became weaker and less frequent. Shane figured they had a few more minutes and then the snake would finally be dead. He snorted, leave it to the asshole Cobra to have to die in a dramatic, drawn out fashion.

Shane gave Trevor another squeeze before answering, "Yeah, I may have noticed you weren't around."

He continued to hold Trevor tight as he rocked him while whispering loving words into his mate's ear. All the while, Shane had to continue to remind himself that this wasn't a dream. That he finally had Trevor back in his embrace.

"Oh, my god! Are you crying?" Trevor asked his eyes widening in shock.

Shane touched his cheek, shocked when his fingers met with moisture. "Huh, look at that. I am. I didn't think I had functioning tear ducts anymore."

Trevor gave a throaty laugh as he rubbed his cheek against Shane's chest. Shane smiled, noting he wasn't the only one who longed for a scent exchange.

Trevor made a few passes before tilting his head back, "I never doubted you would come for

me." Trevor declared.

"They would have had to kill me to stop me from finding you. I love you and the only place you belong is by my side."

"I love you, too. I'm sorry for all those things I said on the video. The drugs—"

Shane put a finger to Trevor's lips. "Don't worry about it. I know you didn't mean it."

Trevor let out a choked sob. "I missed you so much."

"Don't worry, I have no plans on letting you out of my sight ever again. Like it or not, you're permanently stuck with me."

"That's something I'd be more than happy to live with," Trevor returned before they shared a soft, long, tender kiss.

Shane closed his eyes and breathed in deep, relishing in the fact that he once more got to enjoy the scent of his man. Life couldn't get any better.

Chapter Ten

Trevor carried a box up to the stairs to the master bedroom. After setting it down, he took a few minutes to catch his breath. Even though it had been a full month since he'd been rescued, he still had some lingering aftereffects from all the venom they'd pumped into him.

He sat on the edge of the bed as he thought back to the weeks following the rescue and how painful his detox had been. If it hadn't been for the support of Shane, Trevor doubted he would have made it.

Strangely enough, Shane hadn't been his only supporter. Not only had Jade stayed and helped Owen wean Trevor off the venom, but Dalton continued to stick to Shane and Trevor like duct tape. While Shane acted annoyed by the continued hero worship thing, Trevor could tell Shane had a soft spot for the tiny Lynx.

Trevor smiled at the irony. Who would have thought that they'd end up mentoring some

orphaned kid? Trevor, who'd grown up in a loveless foster home, and Shane, who'd been sold to a monster by his own mother. It was so shocking that it was almost laughable.

Still, Trevor wouldn't have traded his makeshift family away for the world.

"How you feeling?" Shane asked as he came into the bedroom and sat on the bed next to Trevor.

"Tired, but excited. I still can't believe we bought the house next door to Kevin and Jared."

"I know, it's so domestic that if I don't watch it, I could lose my resident psycho status." Shane gave a mock shudder.

Trevor laughed as he gave Shane a playful punch. "Speaking of domestic, where is our son?"

"Dalton went with Jade for a little recon."

"You let him hang out with a Black Widow spider?" Trevor gapped at him.

Shane gave him a dry look. "Please, there isn't anyone more protective of the kid, aside from you and me. If anyone so much as looks at Dalton wrong, she'll rip their head off and I don't mean figuratively."

Trevor pressed his lips together before finally nodding. "I guess you do have a point there."

"Besides," Shane got a sly look in his eyes as he reached over and tugged at the hem of Trevor's shirt, "that gives us some alone time."

Trevor grinned. "Whatever shall we do to occupy ourselves?"

"I can think of a thing or three."

Shane pulled off Trevor's shirt before going in for a brief, yet ball tingling kiss. Keeping their foreheads pressed together, Shane said, "You get naked I'll try to find the lube. It has to be in one of the boxes here the bedroom."

Trevor stood up and pulled his clothes off in record speed. Unfortunately, it took Shane much longer to find the bottle of lubricant. Naked and perched on his knees, Trevor watched for a few minutes before he decided literally to take matters into his own hands. Reaching down, he fisted his own cock.

"You better hurry up or else I'll finish up before you even get a chance to play with me," Trevor warned before he moaned and tilted his head back.

As always, the sight of his exposed neck made Shane growl in appreciation. Trevor bit back a smile at the desperate edge his mate's tone had taken.

"I should spank you," Shane threatened.

This time Trevor didn't bother hiding his grin. "What good would that do? We both know that only turns me on more."

Shane looked up from the box he'd been searching in. "I guess you do have a point there."

Last time I disciplined you that way, you shot off all over my lap. I still haven't managed to get the mess off my leather pants."

Trevor brought his hand up to his mouth and slowly licked his palm before reaching to grab his dick again. Sitting up higher on his knees, he began to thrust into his spit-slicked fist, making sure his moans were good and loud.

Shane looked in one last box and let out a shout of excitement. "Found it."

Holding up the bottle, he gave a little frown. "Since when did we have cherry flavored?"

"I bought it as a housewarming gift for you," Trevor said.

"Have I told you I love how thoughtful and giving you are?"

Shane tossed the bottle on the bed and began to pull off his clothes.

Trevor tilted his head to the side. "I think you may have said it this morning when I gave you your daily wake-up blow job."

Now naked, Shane climbed onto the bed and batted Trevor's hand away so he could take over the stroking. "Well since you took such good care of me, it's only fair I return the favor now. Get on your stomach."

Trevor happily obeyed, settling himself comfortably and folding his arms under his chin in a makeshift pillow. When he felt the velvet

glide of Shane's lips skating over his spine, Trevor let out a humming sound of bliss.

Ever since he'd gotten back, Shane couldn't seem to get enough of tasting and rubbing against him. Something that Trevor didn't mind in the least for he loved being covered in Shane's scent. He loved his eccentric Leopard and he wanted the whole world to know it.

Shane slowly rained more kisses down Trevor's spine, not stopping until he reached the crease of his ass. Trevor held his breath in anticipation only to let it out with a yelp when Shane parted his globes and pressed a kiss to the tight opening.

"Just a warning, I don't know how long I'm going to last if you keep that up," Trevor warned.

"You'll last for as long as I tell you to," Shane admonished.

Trevor groaned, the words going straight to his cock. Whenever Shane talked that way to him, Trevor was helpless but to do exactly as his mate ordered. "Yes, Shane."

Shane went about proving how he and he alone was in control of the situation. He would lick, bite and suck at Trevor's ass only to pull back right as Trevor reached the edge. Shane continued with that sweet torture for what seemed like an eternity. Halfway through, he added his slicked up fingers to the play, inserting first one, then adding more until he had four digits sawing in

and out of Trevor's hole.

"This lube tastes good," Shane observed in a frustratingly detached way. As if to emphasize his point, he stabbed his tongue inside Trevor's hole.

"Just fuck me!" Trevor snarled as he humped against the mattress in a desperate attempt to relieve some of the ache in his cock.

That burst of anger earned him a slap on the ass, but Trevor didn't mind. He even moaned and arched up into Shane's hand. It also got him what he wanted because Shane moved his fingers and pressed the tip of his cock to Trevor's stretched opening.

"Love you," Shane moaned before he thrust all the way in.

Trevor cried out as pleasure mixed with sweet relief. "Love you, too."

Even though Shane set a slow, sensual rhythm, Trevor soon found himself on the edge of coming. Not that it surprised him. The rim job already had him so jacked up that it really was a miracle Trevor hadn't shot off the minute Shane's cock filled him.

"Please, Shane. I need to come," Trevor whimpered.

Shane leaned down so he could speak into Trevor's ear. "Then come for me, Panther. Just make sure you scream my name when you do it."

So Trevor did just that. Thrusting back against

Shane's cock, Trevor yelled out his mate's name as a hard orgasm slammed into his body. Pleasure and a sense of peace settled over Trevor as he felt Shane joining him, the Leopard's cock twitching, then filling him with hot bursts of semen.

After they'd recovered, Shane rolled to his side and pulled Trevor to his chest so he didn't have to rest in the wet spot. Trevor snuggled happily into his mate's warm body and let out a contented sigh.

"Can I let you on in a little secret?" Trevor asked.

"Sure."

"When Orion had me captive, there was a moment where I doubted that you'd find me."

Shane tensed, but didn't respond.

Trevor continued, "Then I remembered the way you looked at me that first time you said you loved me."

"What look was that?"

"It was a combination, fear, shock, happiness, but the one that stuck out the most to me was the sense of peace that seemed to settle over you. I knew then you were sharing a side of yourself with me that you'd never shown anyone before. That was something that I could never forget, no matter how many drugs Orion pumped into me."

Shane pressed a kiss to Trevor's shoulder. "It's true, you know. Whenever I'm around you, I feel

so at ease. You have a way of silencing all the bad.”

Trevor twisted around so they faced each other. “But you don’t get it. There isn’t any bad in you. There never has been. Just because you’re a Leopard doesn’t mean anything. When I look at you, all I see is Shane, the man I love.”

Shane’s eyes grew suspiciously moist before he replied, “Thanks to you, Panther, I think I can finally believe that.”

Trevor snuggled back into Shane’s arms and let himself drift off to sleep, happy in the knowledge that he was right where he belonged—in the embrace of the most compassionate, loving and kind feline in the coalition.

About the Author

Stephani Hecht is a happily married mother of two. Born and raised in Michigan, she loves all things about the state, from the frigid winters to the Detroit Red Wings hockey team. You can usually find her snuggled up to her laptop, creating her next book.

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