

Hawk shifter Colin has been the mentor to an Eagle shifter named Riley for several months now. During all that time, Colin has been trying to make a halfway decent solider out of the brat while fighting the growing attraction they have for one another. As a rare breed of shifter, Riley is constantly in danger of being captured and forced into slavery. Colin has his hands full with training Riley and protecting the younger man against their enemies. Then Colin discovers there's a bigger threat to Riley. This one more dangerous than all the others. Riley can't run away from this threat either since it comes from within him. Will Colin be able to save Riley from himself or will the Eagle be lost to his own insanity?

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# Riley's Regret Jost Shifter Eleven

By

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#### Dedication

To all those out there who are suffering in silence.

### Chapter One

In retrospect, maybe it hadn't been such a good idea to draw smiley faces on all the targets at the coalition firing range. Not only had it pissed off the felines, but the Hawks had failed to find the humor in it as well, which just puzzled Riley, because who didn't like an emoticon every now and again? Even if it was at the end of a rifle site.

Yet, like so many other things in his life, he'd found out the hard way that his actions had yet again left him on the butt side of trouble. So after he'd been chewed out by both the feline and Hawk leaders, Riley had done what any other civil-minded Eagle shifter who was in the hot seat would do—he sneaked out of headquarters.

He'd gone to the one place where he could find peace. The one place where he didn't feel like a freak, reject, underachiever or disappointment, and that was the fountain in the center of the local shopping mall.

As strange as it sounded, that place had the ability to calm him down no matter how upset he became. It may not look like much—just a small

stone circular pool with a tiny cherub in the center, but it did Riley more good than a thousand Dr. Phils ever could.

He stretched out, belly down, across one curve of the wall encompassing the water. All around him, shoppers rushed by. Humans who were all blissfully unaware of what truly lurked amongst them or how awful the world really was. Riley almost hated them for the ignorance.

He let out a sigh as he rested his cheek on the cool stone and skimmed his fingertips over the surface of the water. He'd give anything to go back to that world again. The one where he'd just been another human and didn't know he really was an Eagle shifter and not to have to live with the fact that a whole world of nasty waited out there and that most of them wanted to literally throw his sorry ass into a gold cage.

The water felt cooler than normal. Odd, since as far as Riley could tell, the weather outside hadn't changed. So why should the fountain inside the mall be any different?

"We really need to go," Noah admonished in a strained voice.

Riley gazed at Noah's reflection in the water. Just a bit taller than him and with black hair, the Jaguar shifter had been one of the few who Riley could really call a friend. Noah now wore a worried, harried expression as his gaze darted

from side-to-side. Riley almost wanted to snark at Noah that if he were so worried about getting caught, then maybe he shouldn't have tagged along for the field trip. In the end, Riley held his tongue. He knew the only reason why Noah was there was because of the deep-seated loyalty they had for each other.

"Just give me five more minutes and then I swear we'll head back," Riley promised as he continued to trail fingers over the water's surface.

Riley carefully avoided gazing at his own reflection since he'd never liked what he found there. While many went out of their way to tell him how beautiful and special he was, he just didn't see it. To him, he just appeared to be scrawny. His hair was too pale and unremarkable. His eyes were a dull blue. His mouth was too thin. His nose too narrow. In other words, there was nothing spectacular about him at all.

Which probably was the reason why he got a thrill out of piercing his body. It was the one way he found where he could truly control his appearance and how others viewed him. Numerous parts of his body sported hardware. He currently had one on his bottom lip, one on the side of his nose, another on his right eyebrow, and that was just to name a few. That same thought process went into his hairstyles. His latest style, gelling his blond locks into a faux hawk. As far as

Riley was concerned, if it made him look odd or different, then sign him up.

"Why do you hate home so much? It sure as hell beats living in that gold cage the slaves held you in," Noah snapped.

"I know. I just need to get away once in a while. Sometimes, I feel as if headquarters is just another prison."

Noah's eyes softened with pity. Damn it if Riley didn't despise having that emotion directed at him, too.

"You know, Mitchell is only doing it to protect you. The slavers would just love to get you again—"

"-because I'm an eagle shifter and we're so rare that I'm worth a lot on the black market," Riley finished dully.

God, but if he had to hear that one more time, he was going to toss himself to the Ravens just so he could get it over with. Noah crouched and began to run his hand down Riley's back.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," Riley replied, still dragging his fingers over the water.

It's not like Noah would understand. Noah had been one of the lucky ones. Not only was he able to live amongst other felines, but he'd been reunited with his family. Whereas Riley now found himself living at the same headquarters, but

in the Hawk section which was all the way on the other side of the massive building. To make matters even worse, since Eagle shifters were all but extinct, not only would there never be any family reunions in Riley's future, but he'd be lucky if ever ran into another Eagle, *period*.

"We're worried about you," Noah said.

"Who? You and Mitchell, or you and the guys?"

By *guys*, Riley meant their close knit group of friends. Riley longed for the days before they'd come to the headquarters...when it had just been their ragtag bunch of buddy shifters. The best part had been that they'd all been different breeds then, but nobody had cared. There'd been a couple felines, a Wolf, a Hawk, plus him, the Eagle. They were their very own form of the *Brady's*, shifter version.

"The guys," Noah admitted.

Riley sat up so quickly, Noah had to jump back in order not to get hit. Riley barely noticed as a surge of panic filled his chest. Did they suspect he'd gone off balance again? Damn it, how could they know it? He'd tried so hard to hide it. With as little time as they now spent together, they couldn't have possibly seen it the few times he'd slipped up.

"There's nothing to be worried about," Riley denied in his most all-is-cool voice.

"How about the fight you got into with the Fox

shifter?"

"The little shit should never have dissed Ke\$ha. I warned him that I was a huge fan, but he still had to make a smartass comment about *Blow*. I don't care what he says, it is one of the most awesome songs ever created. So for him to call it, a trashy girl's pathetic attempt at an anthem, was a low...well, blow."

"Maybe, but did you really have to pants him in the middle of the cafeteria?"

"Hey, it's not my fault he was so lacking in assets. Plus, I've been very nice to him ever since. At least once a day, I forward him emails about where he can purchase penis enhancers. So, if you look at it, I'm a good Samaritan."

The look Noah shot him said the Jaguar disagreed. "Okay, then, how about you going kamikaze on the salad bar at the cafeteria?"

"There was a spider crawling in the croutons." Riley reached up and began, self-consciously, to tug at a spike of his hair. At the same moment, he became painfully aware that he chose to wear a t-shirt that read, *My name is Cabana Boy. You rang?* Maybe not the best piece of his wardrobe to be wearing while arguing over his mental stability.

"A spider?" Noah echoed incredulously. "You nearly toppled the thing over."

"It was a very, big spider."

"Was it a Tarantula shifter?"

"No, but like I said, it was huge."

"So, you caused a huge mess and damaged dozens of plates over a normal spider?"

"Did I mention that it was hairy? Plus, I'm quite certain it flipped me off at least once."

Noah gaped at him a moment before snapping, "Normal spiders don't have fingers."

Riley paused to think that one over for a moment. "Oh, sorry then. My bad."

"Let's not even get into how you screwed those two Hawk twins. You didn't even bother to take to the bedroom either, instead you did it right in the middle of the rec—"

"Yes, let's not even go there," Riley snarled, cutting off Noah.

The Jaguar blinked a few times in confusion and Riley rolled his eyes. Of course, Noah would be shocked because Riley never got angry or upset. No, he had to be happy all the time or they started to get worried about him. Then the looks would begin, along with the whispered conversation. If Riley didn't watch it, he'd earn himself another round of 24/7 guard duty courtesy of his overprotective friends. Which wasn't nearly as fun as it sounded.

"Why is everyone making such a big deal over that incident? It was just sex," Riley protested even when just thinking about that encounter made him want to vomit from shame. "Because it's so unlike you, Riley, and that scares the hell out of me. We all remember what happened the last time you had one of your spells," Noah replied in soothing tones.

"Like I could forget you guys tying me up and locking me into a basement for over a week," Riley shot back, his gut clenching at that memory.

"We had no choice. We love you and weren't about to watch you destroy yourself."

Riley jumped to his feet and began to walk away, Noah tagging behind him. The mall was pretty crowded, so they didn't speak again until they were almost to a set of doors leading outside.

"You don't need to worry about me," Riley assured as they stepped outside.

Although spring had come, it was Michigan, so the air still had a bite to it. Riley crossed his arms in an attempt to conserve some body heat as a shiver went through him.

Noah gave him a look that was all doubt, but caring at the same time. "Are you sure about that? Maybe you should just go see Dr. Featherstone to make certain?"

"No!" Riley protested much louder than he intended. He flushed as he willed the panic inside him to calm down. "What I mean is, that's not necessary. I'm fine."

"No, you're not," Noah replied, in a hard, blunt tone.

Riley thought about denying it again, but the determined expression on Noah's face made him realize there would be no bullshitting his way out of this. He and Noah had been through way too much. So Riley went with the only ammunition he had left—the truth.

"I can't let them know that there's something wrong with me. You saw the way they used to treat Shane. Like he was some kind of diseased freak who should put down. I would rather have them look at me as the cast whore than to have to deal with the crap Shane went through."

Noah shook his head. "But for all you know, Dr. Featherstone might be able to help you."

"Yeah, like he was able to help Shane? Or, how about those saps who lost their minds when their first shift went wonky? Call me cynical, but I'm guessing they won't know jack about my problem either."

"I still think you should at least tell somebody. How about Colin? Isn't he supposed to be like your mentor or something?"

The name Colin almost made Riley whimper in shame and fear. At one point, the handsome Hawk shifter had been the only bright spot in Riley's crappy life. Then Riley had blown it by throwing himself at the older man, which had ended in epic fail fashion. Colin had not only rejected him, but he'd done so by pointing out

how young and lacking Riley was.

"Colin is the last one I could go to," Riley rasped. He reached out and placed an imploring hand on Noah's arm. "Please, promise me you won't say anything? I really do have my problem under control. It won't be like last time, I swear."

Noah stared at him for a few moments and Riley could almost see the wheels of worry spinning around in his head. Finally, Noah let out a soft curse. "Fine, but we're going to be keeping a close eye on you."

When Riley began to protest, Noah held up a hand. "That's the deal, take it, or shove it up your ass."

It sucked, but it looked as if he had no other choice. Riley reluctantly nodded his consent. "You do know that if you guys keep hanging all over me somebody might become suspicious?"

"We'll make sure to make it seem as casual as possible."

"How long am I going to have to put up with having one of you by my side all the time?"

"For as long as it takes for this spell to pass over," Noah answered in a soft voice.

Riley let out a sigh and damned if it didn't hitch a bit. While part of him realized that the concern came from love, another part of him felt pissed. Why couldn't they just leave him alone? Just because he lost his temper a couple of times didn't mean he was going to lose his mind again. Riley had everything under control this time. He was stronger and older, so there was no reason for them to start acting like a bunch of grandmas. "Fine, but I still say it's a big waste of energy. I'm doing okay."

"No offense, Riley, but sometimes you're the worst judge of that."

"Whatever." Riley gave a faked indifferent shrug. "Can we just go home? If Papa Hawk notices I'm missing, he's going to piss kittens."

A strong hand came from behind and gripped Riley by the nape of the neck. "Too late, he's already noticed."

Noah paled, while Riley let out yelp. Even though he couldn't see the speaker, he instantly recognized the voice as Colin. Oh gig, the shit is up.

Colin pulled Riley in closer so his back was nearly flush against the Hawk's strong chest. Under any other situation, Riley would have been thrilled to find himself in that position. At that moment, however, fear filled him. Colin wasn't just angry, the fury felt nearly palpable as it rolled from him.

"Tell me, Eagle, what is the number one rule that you're supposed to follow?" Colin demanded.

"That if you eat out, it's a good idea to only eat two thirds of your plate because serving sizes are out of control?"

Noah let out a groan while the Colin's grip tightened to the point of painful.

"You want to try that again?" Colin growled, his lips just inches from Riley's ear.

"Always make sure to put the seats back down when using the cast bathrooms because the female Hawks get bitch-slap angry if you don't?"

This time Noah hissed a low curse as he shook his head in disbelief. Not that Riley blamed him. He didn't know why he was letting loose with such suicidal, idiotic statements either. Colin gave him a little shake and Riley let out a squawk that sounded much like his Eagle half.

A burning heat covered his cheeks as several humans cast amused and curious glances his way. Great, now he'd committed the most cardinal shifter sin of all, to never, ever, ever bring attention to their kind. Desperate to make amends, he flashed a huge smile and waved to the crowd.

"Don't worry, folks. While he *is* going to take me home and spank me, I like it."

"God, Riley. Just stop talking, please," Noah said in a near whisper.

"I'm trying to, my lips just don't seem to want to stay together," Riley replied in a like tone.

"Some duct tape should fix that," Colin snapped as he began to drag Riley toward the parking lot.

Riley glanced up at the older, taller man. While he looked as hot as ever with his short, dark, hair and deep brown eyes, Colin also looked pissed. A tick even developed in the Hawk's strong looking jaw line. His full lips were pressed together in a tight line and every muscle in his built body seemed tense.

Turning back, Colin said, "You better get home, too, Noah. Your mate is crazy with worry over you."

Riley realized he was in trouble. Big, big, big trouble. This was one of those times he wouldn't be able to sweet talk his way out of it either. Shame and self-loathing filled him as he realized he once again let Colin down.

### Chapter Two

Colin dragged Riley to the car and all but threw the ungrateful brat's scrawny ass into the passenger seat. After Colin slammed the door shut, he rounded the trunk, then took a moment to gather himself.

His heart, which had been pounding with fear since the moment he'd discovered Riley missing, now hammered with anger and a heavy dose of frustration. How Riley could still continue to flaunt the rules when he knew the dangers he could face, made Colin want to grab the smaller man by the shoulders and try to shake some sense into his cute blond head.

Colin took a few breaths before he went to the driver's side and climbed in behind the wheel. He whipped his glare in Riley's direction, ready to rip into him. Something Colin found himself doing with alarming frequency. This time, something in Riley's demeanor stopped Colin short.

Riley sat, shoulders hunched and his side

pressed against the door, as if he wanted to put as much distance between the two of them as possible. His face was down, but Colin could still see the expression stamped there—hopelessness.

That was new. Riley ran with the tendency to be very expressive, so Colin had seen the Eagle wear many masks. Anger, hate, amused, happy, and aroused was just a handful. Never before had Riley seemed so desolate as if he were two steps from curling up into a ball and calling it quits.

The sudden swing in moods puzzled Colin as he reminded himself that, moments before, Riley had been dishing out the smartass comments. As stupid as it sounded, even Riley's hair appeared sad, the normal spiked, blond faux hawk drooping into his equally pensive brown eyes. He nibbled on his bottom lip, his teeth tugging at the gold ring decorating that piece of flesh.

"What were you thinking?" Colin finally asked, his voice edged with anger.

Riley shifted his gaze sideways, his normally warm, brown eyes bleak and suspiciously wet. "I'm sorry. I know I'm always saying that to you, but I really do mean it this time."

"Sorry that you disobeyed my orders yet again, or sorry that you got caught?"

"Both," Riley replied without so much as beat of hesitation.

Colin ran a hand through his hair in frustration.

It was either that or give in to his impulse to wrap his fingers around Riley's throat.

"You would have thought that one year in captivity would have taught you a lesson. Do you want to end up back in some slaver's cage?"

Riley mumbled something unintelligible.

"Repeat that and speak up this time," Colin snapped.

Riley tugged at an errant blond lock as he continued to gnaw on his bottom lip. Just as Colin was about to reissue his last order, Riley replied, "No, of course I don't want to end up there. They don't have cable and only have dial-up internet."

Colin decided to focus on the first part of Riley's answer and ignore the latter, snarky half. "You could have fooled me because running off on your own is a sure fire way to get captured again. What's worse is, you brought a younger brother of the feline coalition along with you. I don't think Mitchell would have been forgiving to any bird shifters if your actions got Noah kidnapped."

"I never asked Noah to come with me. He just tagged along. In fact, I specifically told him to go home at least three times. He can be very stubborn at times."

"Really?" Colin gave a harsh laugh. "That's rich coming from you since you stubbornly refuse to listen to me."

"I try to follow all your orders. I just get sidetracked sometimes."

Colin took in several deep breaths in a feeble attempt to squash the building anger inside him. "Do you have any idea how ungrateful you are?"

Riley glanced up again, this time his brow creased in confusion. "I'm very grateful for everything you and Daniel have done for me."

"If that's the case then why do you refuse to follow my orders? Not just in where you can and can't go, but in training?"

Riley started to roll his eyes, but seemed to catch himself. "Come on. Look at me. I'll never be soldier material."

"Maybe not, but you could at least learn to defend yourself enough to get away if you're ever attacked."

A tense silence settled over the car as Riley blinked at him a few times.

"Sometimes I think it would just be better for everyone if I let slavers take me again," Riley finally said, his voice harsh with emotion.

Colin sucked in a breath as horror filled him. "What in the fuck would make you think something like that?"

"If I were gone, you wouldn't have to be stuck with me any longer. I would think that would make you happy. I know the only reason you even talk to me is because Daniel ordered you to be my mentor."

"I would never wish that on you. I was there the day you and the others were rescued from those damn slavers, so I know how they treated you."

Colin's gut clenched as he recalled the large common room they'd stumbled across at the slave compound. In the center stood a giant gold cage in which they'd kept Riley as if he was some kind of trophy on display.

"It wasn't as bad for me as it was Noah. At least they didn't touch me. They just liked to look at me." Riley's breath hitched as he tugged at his hair again. "Well, the head Raven liked to stand in front of the cage and make me watch while he jacked off, but that pretty much was the worst of it. They didn't want to break me or anything. I had to be in good condition so they could get top dollar when they sold me."

Pain sliced through Colin as he thought about the gentle Eagle having to live through that kind of humiliation. "How could you possibly think going back to that would be better for any of us?"

Another heavy silence passed before Riley let out a shuddering sigh. "They hate me."

"Who? The slavers?"

"No, the Hawks." Riley continued to tug on his own hair, the movement becoming so jerky and hard, there was no way it couldn't have hurt.

Unable to watch any longer, Colin reached out and stayed Riley's hand. "They don't hate you. They just don't understand some of the things you do."

"You're wrong. None of them can stand the sight of me."

Colin wanted to shoot off that when the twins were fucking Riley in the middle of the rec room in front of several dozen witnesses, they all seemed to like him very much. He held his tongue. Somehow, he just knew that wasn't what Riley needed to hear.

"I know my Hawks and they would never be deliberately cruel to anyone. If you just gave them a chance, they'd accept you," Colin reasoned.

He should know, too, since he grew up with most of the cast. As they'd aged, their numbers may have dropped drastically thanks to the never relenting Raven attacks, but that had only made the survivors bond tighter. As a result, they knew just about everything about each other.

Riley shot him a sideway glance, his disbelief easy to read. "I don't think there is anything I can do or say that will ever make them like me. I'm different, both because I'm weird and because I'm the only Eagle in the state. Hell, for all we know I could be the only remaining Eagle, period."

"Just give me and Daniel a little more time on that one. We think we may have a lead on your family. For all we know, you could have parents and siblings out there somewhere."

Something flickered over Riley's gaze, but it went by so quickly, Colin never got a chance to read it. Riley jerked his hand free from Colin's hold and somehow managed to plaster himself even more against the passenger door.

Colin remembered a time not so long ago, when Riley would have leaned into him instead of away. For a brief time, Riley had even looked up to Colin, if only in his own strange way. That all shattered when Riley tried to kiss him. While Colin wanted it so badly, he'd pushed Riley away. It'd been the hardest thing he'd ever done, but as Riley's mentor, Colin had no rights in starting anything physical.

That didn't stop him from having numerous fantasies about the Eagle, however. While Colin would never dare voice them aloud, he spent way too much time lost in thoughts of Riley and his sexy body.

Which is why it'd cut so deep when Colin had seen Riley screwing around with the twins. So much so that he'd pulled away from any form of contact with Riley aside from official mentor business.

"Forget I said anything. Just take me back to headquarters, please," Riley whispered.

Colin wanted to dig deeper into the situation,

but if there was one thing he'd learned about Riley, it was that if the Eagle didn't want to talk about something, nothing could convince him to open up. Thus, Colin just gave a deep sigh and started the engine.

The drive back to headquarters only took about five minutes, but it seemed much longer because of the heavy tension in the car. As Colin parked in his usual spot and turned the car off, he noticed Riley's posture grew more defeated.

"Gage should be back sometime this week," Colin said in attempt to cheer Riley up.

A Hawk shifter, Gage had belonged to part of Riley's group of ragtag shifters. After they were captured together, they each somehow managed to survive the year in captivity. Once they were rescued, they'd been placed with various shifter families until they could get on their feet and adjusted to their new lives in regular shifter society.

Riley glanced up at the huge building that housed their headquarters. Once an auto factory, the felines had converted it to their needs. Later on, when Daniel had mated with one of the feline leader's brothers, the Hawks had moved their military base there as well. While it may not look like all that much on the outside, it surely didn't warrant the look of horror Riley shot it to be. By the sharp scent of fear rolling off the kid, one

would think Freddy Krueger, Jason Voorhees, Pinhead, and the entire Kardashian family lived inside.

"Did you hear me? I said that Gage's team will be coming back soon," Colin stressed again.

"That will be good. He's been gone a long time," Riley mumbled as he continued to look at the building as if it would leap forward and bite him at any minute. Colin thought back to the Riley of just a few months ago. He'd been so happy, carefree and a bit mischievous. In a short span, the guy's emotions had taken a complete one eighty. Now Riley seemed too sad and withdrawn. Sure, he still acted mischievous at times, but it seemed as if he was only going through the motions.

The worry gave way to exasperation, finally making Colin snap. "Talk to me, here. What can I do to make it so you're happy again?"

"You could let me move back with the McKinzie's," Riley ventured in a small voice.

"I'm sorry, but that's not an option."

"Why? They were really nice to me and they didn't care that I was an Eagle while they were Hawks."

"That may be true, but we had word that your location had been leaked to the slavers. You know how much the bounty is for your capture. That's going to bring out all kinds of bad characters looking to cash in and they wouldn't have been

nice to anyone who got in their way. We had to move you for both your safety and the McKinzie's. You wouldn't want them to get hurt, would you?"

"No, of course not." Riley nibbled on his bottom lip for a second and then asked, "But isn't there somewhere else I can go besides that crappy room at headquarters?"

That's the only place we can keep you safe. Plus, I decided that it would be good for you to be separated from all other kinds of diversion until you get adjusted."

"None of my other friends had to be so isolated."

"None of them have pulled half the number of stunts you have."

A brief flicker of pain crossed Riley's eyes and Colin regretted the words. Not enough to take them back, though. Especially given the fact they were coming back from yet another one of the brat's unscheduled mall visits.

"Please? A pair of feline soldiers said I could stay with them," Riley persisted.

Colin shook his head before Riley even finished the sentence. "That's out of the question, too. While Daniel may be willing to trust the felines with our novices, I'm not the same."

"Why?"

"They don't think the same way we do. We're different and I've always believed that we

shouldn't comingle the cast with the coalition so much. I know Daniel may be mated to a feline, but it's just a fluke. Our breeds don't belong together."

Riley blinked a few times before his jaw ticked in anger. "That's not fair. I'm friends with plenty of felines and we get along just fine."

"I'm a lot older than you are, Riley. Plus, I grew up in the shifter world, where you just stumbled your way in it a few years ago. I think I understand how things work a whole hell of a lot better than you do."

"Or maybe you're just some snobby elitist who needs to catch up with the times. You're not some small caste who's just struggling to stay alive anymore. Thanks to Mitchell and his felines, you have a great place to train your Hawks and a chance to start over again," Riley seethed, finally coming out of his doom and gloom shell.

"And maybe I'd care more about that statement if it didn't come from some airheaded, tart," Colin shot back.

Those ugly words hung in the air. Kind of like an anvil hovering over a cartoon character. Colin knew the end result would be the same, too. Going by the bright glint in Riley's eyes, he'd gone beyond pissed.

Sure enough, Riley took in a shaky breath and let him have it. "Better to be some tart than to still be caught up by one incident that took place over twenty years ago. Yeah, I get it. The Hawks lost almost everything when they helped protect some feline children from the Ravens. But I've lost everything, too. At one time, I had a family, a loving home and happiness. You don't see me going around growling at everyone over it, like you do."

Not pausing after he delivered that bomb, Riley shot him one last glare before the Eagle hopped from the car. He even slammed the door after him to add to his dramatic exit.

Colin's mouth parted in shock. Aside from Daniel, nobody ever dared speak to him that way. Colin realized he should go after Riley and demand he apologize. Since Colin was his mentor, Riley should have never acted that way toward him. In the end, he remained rooted into place because a part of Colin knew full well he'd deserved the verbal dressing down.

Colin also knew another thing. While Riley may be a brat, the fire the Eagle just displayed turned Colin on more than anything else ever had, which made him want to curse in frustration and berate himself at the same time. Quite simply, it was forbidden for mentors to ever start anything physical with their novices. So like it or not, Riley was hands off.

## Chapter Three

Riley rushed through headquarters to the side of the building that housed the Hawk's operations. The entire time, he forced himself not to look back to see if Colin followed. After his little outburst, Riley just needed to put as much space between himself and his mentor as possible. The last thing he wanted to deal with was yet another of Colin's lectures.

As soon as he entered the doors, Riley felt the chilly vibes thrown his way. He ducked his head and tried to tell himself that he didn't care what the others thought about him. A lump formed in his throat for a brief moment before he forced himself to swallow it down.

To think that at one time, he'd actually liked it on the Hawk's side of the building. Decorated in all greens and browns, plus with all the various plants lying around, it was made with a bird's comfort in mind. Riley used to find solace in the surroundings and, for a while, it soothed the

demons inside him.

Now, all he found in the rooms were hate, pain and most of all, regret. As he walked to his quarters, he passed the one place in particular that never failed to raise strong emotions—the rec room.

Even though he knew it was a mistake, Riley paused to glance inside. At one time, he'd loved the place. With a large-screen plasma television, a pool table, plus numerous video games, it was his inner geek's wet dream come true.

Riley curled his fingers around the doorjamb as his stomach rolled in slow waves of nausea. While he knew he should turn heel and book it in the opposite direction, his damn feet refused to obey. His mind screamed, Run! Get the fuck out of here before they see you and make some kind of fucked up, mean comment.

Damned if those feet remained frozen. His gaze shifted first to the pool table and then the coffee table he'd lain on as the twins had fucked him like some kind of personal sex toy. As always, whenever Riley thought back to that incident, he recalled how he'd looked up during the act to find an audience.

The worst part had been that Colin had been there, his mouth opened in shock. Then he'd given a look of pure fury before he turned around and walked away. Ever since then, Riley couldn't even meet the Hawk's gaze, the shame simply too great.

Riley knew he'd hurt Colin that day. While Colin may pull the whole mentor card out whenever they got too close, in the end, Riley realized the truth. All the heated looks Colin shot his way screamed the Hawk's true feelings.

That was when Riley had tried to take things further between them only to have Colin literally shove him away. It'd torn a piece of Riley's heart. In the months of serving under Colin, Riley's feelings for the Hawk grew stronger each day.

The one thing Riley couldn't figure out is why in the hell he'd played around with the fucking twins in the first place. While he wasn't exactly a virgin, he'd never been a slut, either. He'd just been so hurt and confused by Colin's rejection that he'd stupidly lashed out. Fat lot of good it'd done him, too. Now, Riley was the one who was paying the price instead of the other way around.

A small whimper slipped past Riley's dry lips as self-loathing filled him. Hurt or not, he knew that he should have never lashed out at Colin that way. The only problem was how he was supposed to apologize when the only time Colin ever talked to him was to yell or reprimand.

Terror filled Riley as he thought back further, to a time before he'd met Colin and his Hawks, to when Riley had been living with Ranger and the others. That'd been the last time Riley let his impulses drive him. That had ended with him nearly drowning when he'd broken into a local high school and borrowed their pool. If it hadn't been for Ranger showing up at just the right time, Riley would have died.

That little episode resulted in his friends slapping him into chains until Riley got better control of his mind. While he now knew they only did it for his wellbeing, at the time of his basement imprisonment, Riley hated them for their interference.

Salvador, one of the bigger male Hawks in the rec room turned and spotted Riley standing in the doorway, doing a perfect imitation of a statue. A blond, with cold blue eyes, the Hawk hated Riley even before the twin fuck-a-thon.

Riley froze, praying that if he didn't say anything, maybe—just maybe, the jerk would leave him alone for once. However, since his day ranked in the top-ten of all time crappiest ever, Riley knew he wouldn't get his wish.

Sure enough, Salvador's upper lip bowed in disgust. "I would have thought that you'd never show your face in here again."

"Maybe he's hoping the twins were here," added Frank, another Hawk who just happened to be Salvador's best friend.

Riley started to shake his head in denial, but

Salvador either didn't notice or just plain didn't give a rat's ass. Tilting his head to the side, Salvador's lips curled up into a spine-chilling smile.

"I hate to break it to you, but Daniel sent the twins on a mission and they're not expected back for a few weeks." Salvador ran his hand over his groin and leered at Riley. "I think we can find you a replacement fuck though."

"No!" Riley replied, fear making his voice overly loud. Wincing at his display of weakness, Riley took a few calming breaths before adding, "Sorry, what I meant is that I'm not looking for anybody, twins or otherwise. I was just on my way to my room."

Salvador moved in closer, his hand coming up to give Riley a not-so-gentle pat on the cheek. "You sure you don't want some company?"

Several snickers came from the Hawks in the rec room. Riley felt his cheeks flame. He wished, not for the first time, that he could go back to the time when it'd been just him and his friends in that crappy apartment they used to share.

Even though it went against all his animal instincts, Riley lowered his gaze submissively. "Thanks, but I'm really tired. I think I'll just take a nap."

Salvador moved his hand to Riley's hair. Grabbing the locks, the Hawk pulled hard.

Riley gasped as pain shot through his head. Salvador jerked harder, forcing Riley's head to tilt back. As their gazes met, a shiver went down Riley's spine as he saw the raw hate glinting in Salvador's eyes.

"Of course, how stupid of me to forget that Riley thinks he's too good for us, even after the public fuck show he gave us in this very room."

"I don't think that at all. I just—"

"See, that's where you made the mistake, thinking at all. We all know that there's only two things you're good at, screwing and looking pretty. Otherwise, you're just a waste of space."

Riley wanted to argue, but deep down, he knew Salvador was right. So instead, Riley let out a shuddering sigh as he gave a slight nod. After all the stunts he'd pulled, he knew he shouldn't expect the Hawks to think anything else.

"You're right," Riley whispered, the hurt and shame clawing like talons at his insides. Salvador leaned in and spoke the next words so low, only Riley heard.

"Maybe I should have you prove it by making you drop on your knees and suck me off right here in front of everybody."

Fear sliced through Riley. Salvador had six inches and at lease fifty pounds on Riley, so the Hawk could very well make that threat come true. Riley tried to pull away, only to be brought up

short when Salvador tightened his grip on Riley's hair.

"Please," Riley rasped, hating himself for begging.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't."

Riley's mind raced until it locked in on the one thing he knew could get him out of this fucked-up mess. "Colin won't like it. You saw how mad he got last time I was bad that way." He nearly sobbed in relief when that got his desired reaction. Salvador let out a hiss of disgust as he all but threw Riley away from him.

"Fine, go hide out in your room," the Hawk sneered.

"Thank you," Riley said.

He scrambled away before Salvador or one of the other Hawks changed their minds. He'd made it two steps before Salvador called out, "We'll see you at dinner. Chip and Harvey are cooking for the cast again tonight and they promised to include a little something extra in your meal."

Riley tensed, but didn't turn to look back. Call him stupid, but he wouldn't give Salvador that satisfaction. Instead, Riley walked the rest of the way back to his room. After he'd punched in the code to unlock the door, he rushed inside and slammed it shut.

Pressing his back against the wood, Riley took several deep breaths. His body began to tremble as tears welled up in his eyes. Just as quickly, he blinked them away. He'd never been a crybaby before and damn if he'd start now just because the cast couldn't stand the air he breathed.

His cell buzzed, alerting him that he had a message. Riley ignored it. He'd had more than enough conversations that day. If he didn't talk to anyone else for the next week, that'd be fine with him.

Rubbing his face with one hand, Riley pushed away from the door and crossed the small space that was his room. His bed and bureau took up most of the floor, so he didn't have far to walk. Sliding open the top drawer of his dresser, his gaze immediately fixated on the small fighting dagger lying inside.

Sharpened to a razor-like edge, it was his prized possession and the only thing he had left that belonged to his father. Lately it'd become Riley's new best friend and not just because of sentimental value. He stretched out his hand to grab it, but hesitated just as his fingers were inches from the blade.

If Ranger were to find out what he was doing with the dagger, Riley would be screwed. Not in a good way either. While Noah, Ranger and the rest to their friends, may suspect that Riley's moods were back in full force, they couldn't possibly know for certain—not with all of them living apart

now. However, if they were to see the blood or cuts, then they'd know for certain that Riley had taken a one-way trip to Crazed Eagle Junction.

His stomach rumbled loudly, reminding him that he hadn't had breakfast or lunch. Salvador hadn't been the first one to mention Riley was getting some additional seasonings in his meals. As a result, Riley stopped eating with the cast altogether. He used to skip over to the feline's cafeteria, but the salad bar incident had earned him a permanent barring from the place.

He would have grabbed something at the mall, but he never had any cash and it wasn't like he had any way of getting a job either. There was no way Colin would allow it. Riley could have asked Noah to borrow a few bucks, but pride held him back.

Going to the cast kitchen, was out of the question, too. Only those Hawks assigned to that duty were allowed in there, and the room was always locked. As a result, Riley just had to make do with food he managed to nick here and there.

His stomach rumbled again and his gaze locked on the blade.

Well if he couldn't control his hunger, the way others treated him or the fact that Colin detested him, then Riley may as well give in to his impulses. He'd do his thing then shift afterward so the wounds healed. Nobody would ever have to be the wiser.

This time, he'd be more careful, and only cut a little bit. He wouldn't allow himself to get lost in the high and get so carried away. The last time that happened, he had one hell of a mess to clean up by the time he finished.

Curling his fingers around the cool handle, a shiver went through his body. He knew that what he was about to do was wrong, and not what a normal person *would* do, but he just had to find some way to release the pain.

He picked up the knife and headed for the bathroom. As he shut the door, he promised himself that this would be the absolute last time he ever did this.

Honestly, it would.

## Chapter Four

Colin had wanted to chase after Riley when the Eagle told him off. Unfortunately, Colin was already ten minutes late for a meeting with his brother, and as a result, he had no choice but to let the brat go off without the reprimand he so richly deserved.

He made his way to Daniel's office, already dreading the reception he'd be getting. Daniel didn't ever like to be kept waiting and when he found out it was because Colin once again failed in his role as Riley's mentor, things would be even chillier.

Sure enough, as soon as he pushed open the door to Daniel's office, a cold glare met him. Colin let out a low sigh as he sat in one the two chairs in front of Daniel's desk. His brother's usually immaculate coalition-issue uniform was wrinkled, the black fabric boasting of more than a few smudges. Even his brown hair looked as if it had a rough day, the normally perfectly styled locks

standing on end in several places.

"You wanted to see me?" Colin said.

"Yeah, around ten minutes ago," Daniel bit back angrily.

"Sorry, I had a complication come up." Colin cocked a brow. "It looks as if I'm not the only one with that problem."

"Fucking Shane and Carson," Daniel seethed.

Ah, that explained so much. If Colin only had a nickel for every time someone started a rant with that very sentiment.

"I take it they were bad kitties?"

"Only if you count having two cars, a city bus and a mailbox go up into flames as bad."

Colin let out a low whistle. "A mailbox? Isn't that a federal offense?"

"God, I hope so. Maybe then the feds will come and arrest the two menaces."

Colin just smiled, for he knew, bitching aside, his brother really did like the two felines and their unconventional ways. In truth, Colin liked them, too, perhaps because they were so different from all the other felines.

Daniel pinned Colin with a knowing look. "I already know what your complication is—Riley."

"It wasn't that big of a deal. He just snuck off to the mall."

"Where he could have easily been spotted by the slavers." Daniel let out with a low moan as he scrubbed a hand over his face. "I sometimes wonder if he wants to get captured again."

"Given the conditions they kept him in, I highly doubt it," Colin replied, deliberately leaving out that Riley expressed that exact wish not one hour ago.

"Are you so sure of that?"

"Of course I am. They kept the poor kid in a cage in the center of their common room as if he was some fucking parakeet in an old lady's living room. They didn't even let him out to use the bathroom, he had to make do with a bucket. Who would ever want to go back to that?"

"That's just it. I don't know what's going on in Riley's head. No matter what we do, the kid just can't seem to adjust to his new life here," Daniel countered.

"He was doing much better when he was living off base with that Hawk couple," Colin replied.

"Why do you always defend him? Especially when you act like you can't stand him half the time."

Colin clamped his lips shut and looked away, refusing to answer that question. Too bad it was already too late. Daniel knew him way too well for Colin to ever hide anything. Leaning forward, Daniel rested his hands on his desk as he carefully studied Colin's face.

"You have feelings for him, don't you?" Daniel

accused softly.

"Of course, I do. As his mentor, it's my job to want the best for him."

"Don't be coy with me. You know what I mean."

Colin paused a few moments before deciding to admit the truth. "It's nothing I can't handle."

"Really? Because I don't think so."

Anger surged through Colin, but he didn't know who to direct it at—Daniel, Riley or himself.

"Look, what more do you want from me? I'm doing everything I can to make sure it doesn't interfere with my duties. I only interact with him during training sessions, I don't seek him out, and I've told him that there can't ever be anything between us."

"You've actually discussed this with him?"

"Yes, when he tried to kiss me. I pushed him away and told him that while I may have feelings for him, too, there could never be anything between us because of our formal cast relationship."

"When did that happen?"

Colin searched his memory. "Just a couple of days before Riley and the twins..."

He trailed off as a cold, hard brick of realization sank into his stomach.

"You still think it's no big deal?" Daniel demanded.

"I knew I upset him, but I didn't think I hurt him badly enough to want to get back at me that way."

"Maybe it was a matter of him trying to prove to himself that he was still desirable?"

"How could he think otherwise? He's good looking, sweet and so smart."

Daniel arched a brow. "Really? What happened to him being impulsive, afraid of heights and a piss-poor fighter?"

"All that stuff just makes him unique," Colin replied in a near growl.

A heavy silence filled the room as he realized his protective urges for the Eagle all but screamed his true feelings. Hanging his head he admitted, "Okay, Riley means way too much to me. My attraction to him is only growing, too. It's not going away liked I'd hoped when I distanced myself from him either."

"Do you love him?"

That question hit way too close to the truth, so Colin lashed out the same way he always did whenever things got too touchy-feely. He lifted his head and drawled, "Seriously? I know we've been reunited for over two years now, but I think it's still too soon for us to be having teenage girl conversations. Next, you'll be asking me over for a fondue party or something."

As usual, the sarcasm had zero effect on Daniel.

He said, "I'll take that as a yes then."

"Is that what you called me in for? To ask me about my love life?"

"No, although the reason does concern Riley."

Colin felt his hackles rise as that damn protective urge reared up again. "What about him?"

"Ranger came by to see me today. In case you don't remember he's the wolf shifter that was in the informal pack Riley used to belong to."

"Of course I remember," Colin snapped. "What did fur face want?"

"He thinks it would be better if Riley came to live at Mitchell's dwelling?"

"No," Colin replied, even before Daniel finished the question.

"Why, not? Did you forget that I also happen to be living there, too since Brent is Mitchell's brother."

"Yeah and so are a half million other relations. The last thing Riley needs is to deal with that kind of confusion. He wouldn't cope well living with that many other shifters. As it is, he barely leaves his room, and the Hawks only work in our section of the building instead of living there, 24/7."

"Riley did fine when he lived with Ranger's old group."

"Do we really know that for certain?" Colin challenged. "Whenever I try to ask Ranger about

Riley's past behavior, the wolf clamps up so tight that not even WikiLeaks could get anything from him."

"So if you don't want him to go live with Mitchell, then what do you suggest?"

"I'll up his training. By the time I'm done with Riley, he'll be too tired to act out anymore."

"I don't think that's going to work."

Colin stood. "No offense, brother, but you don't know him as well as I do. This will be just what Riley needs."

Grabbing the door handle, Colin paused when Daniel said, "There's no shame in asking for help with this. It won't make you a failure as a mentor."

Keeping his gaze directed at the door, Colin replied, "Sometimes I think that all I am is a failure as far as Riley is concerned."

Not wanting to hear Daniel's reply, Colin left the office and went out to find Riley. He figured he might as well start the extra training sessions right away. He decided to start his search in Riley's bedroom since that'd become the Eagle's favorite place to hang out.

Once he got there, Colin knocked, but didn't get a response. Putting his nose to the door, Colin breathed in deep. He knew that even through the door, he'd be able to detect Riley's unique scent of pine and rainwater. A low growl rumbled in his chest when he detected Riley's scent coming from inside the room. This meant the brat was either ignoring him or asleep. Lately, it seemed that Riley functioned in one of two moods, get-your-ass-out-of-bed lazy, or bouncing-off-the-fucking-walls happy. Just as Colin opened his mouth to yell, he detected another scent, the hard, metallic bite of blood.

Heart hammering with dread, Colin quickly punched in the code to unlock the door then burst into the room, calling out Riley's name. When he got no answer, save for the sound of the shower running, Colin's fear shot up a couple hundred notches.

He rushed into the bathroom, his stomach clenching as the scent of blood grew tenfold. Not surprising since the room looked as if somebody had splashed the stuff around. Red puddles, streaks and splatters marred the counter and floor.

Colin's gaze next swept to the shower and what he found there almost made him lose his mind. Riley sat on his ass, under the spray, fully clothed, his legs tucked tight to his chest.

"Riley, are you okay?" Colin asked as he looked Riley over for wounds.

Given the position Riley was in, Colin couldn't tell for certain the full extent of Riley's injures. Riley jerked his head up, shock briefly traveling across his brown eyes.

"I'm so sorry," he said, his words tumbling over each other.

"Why? What did you do?"

"I didn't mean to lose control like I did. It was only supposed to be one or two small ones. Then I could have shifted and the wounds would have healed before anyone found out."

Colin reached in to turn off the shower. He gasped when he found the water to be near freezing. "How long have you been here?"

Riley gave a half shrug as he began to shiver in earnest. "I don't know. I kept trying to shift into my Eagle form so I kind of lost track of time."

Now that the water was no longer running over his body, several cuts on Riley's arms began to bleed. Even under the camouflage, Colin counted a half dozen, vertical slashes. The bleeding appeared to be getting worse by the moment and Colin realized he had to get Riley to the infirmary quickly.

Scooping the smaller man into his arms, Colin turned and left the bathroom. He paused only long enough to grab a blanket before Colin went out into the hallway. Several Hawks gasped in shock as he rushed by, but Colin barely noticed, too intent on getting Riley help.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," Riley kept chanting.

His head lolled back and Colin's stomach

lurched as he noted how pale Riley looked. It made Colin wonder how much blood had washed down the drain before he found Riley. When Riley's eyes rolled back into his head, Colin gave him a firm shake.

"Stay with me, here! Don't go to sleep on me."

"So, sorry," Riley repeated, his voice barely audible. "I just wanted to get away from all the shit for a while."

That explanation made no sense to Colin. How could slicing yourself up make you feel better about anything?

"I tried to shift to heal the wounds, but my Eagle wouldn't come out." Riley's tinged blue lips curled into a weak smile. "I guess I pissed it off or something."

They finally reached the infirmary. Never before had Colin been happier to see the facility. The feline physician, Doctor Featherstone, was on duty. Yet, another one of Mitchell's brothers, Jacyn, was there, too. Once a medic in the human world, the Jaguar still worked in a medical capacity, both in the field and at headquarters.

Normally, Colin didn't give two flips about felines, but he almost sagged with relief as they rushed forward to help.

"What happened?" Doc barked as he took Riley from Colin.

"I don't know. I went in to check on him and

found him bleeding in a cold shower," Colin explained.

He glanced down at his shirt. Both blood and water covered it, making the fabric stick to Colin's skin. He wrapped his arms around his stomach as he watched them work on Riley.

Jacyn cut away Riley's clothes while the doctor began to assess Riley for injuries. The I'm-sorry chant stopped as Riley's lids fluttered closed.

"Fuck!" Doc cursed, never one for proper bedside etiquette.

"His blood pressure is dropping," Jacyn announced, his gaze on the monitor.

"Start two large bore IV's and run them wide open. We need to replace some of the crap he lost down the drain."

"Should I get some blood from storage?"

"I wish, but we don't know how his system will react to a non-Eagle transfusion."

"How about if you used my blood? We're both bird shifters." Colin offered.

Doc shook his head. "With as little as we know about Eagle shifters, I'm not willing to take the risk—at least not yet. Let me try to get his vitals stabilized by other means first."

After starting the IV's, Jacyn began, frantically, to bandage the numerous slash marks on Riley's arms. To Colin, most of them looked shallow, that was until his gaze focused to the cuts on Riley's

wrists. Those vertical lacerations were deep and were the cause for most of the blood loss.

"Who did this to him?" Jacyn asked, studying the wounds carefully.

"I'm not for sure. When I got there, he was the only one in the room," Colin answered carefully.

His protective instincts toward Riley prevented him from revealing more. As odd as it seemed, Colin felt nearly certain that Riley did all the damage to himself.

Jacyn glanced up to the Doc. "Do you think he's a cutter?"

"As far as I know, I've never seen a shifter with that disorder, but like I said before, we don't know much about Eagles or their medical history," Doc replied. "Do people who cut usually try to commit suicide?"

"Not normally, but this would be a highly unusual case already to begin with."

Colin couldn't take anymore. "Why in the hell would you think Riley would do this to himself?"

Jacyn tossed him a look equal parts surprise and disgust. "With the way your Hawks have been treating him lately, I'd have been surprised if he didn't have some issues."

"What are you trying to say?"

"That you and Daniel need to get you heads out of your asses and take a look at what's been going on in the cast." Colin wanted to deny the accusation, but the words died in his throat as he glanced down at Riley. Given the current condition of his novice, it was pretty obvious he'd fucked up big time.

He then thought back to all the misbehaviors Riley had been displaying, the pranks, the public sex acts, the withdrawing from the rest to the cast, the sneaking out. It'd all been a cry for help. One that Colin hadn't heard.

No more! If it killed him in the process, Colin wasn't about to let anything else happen to Riley. He also vowed that if he had to tie down every one of Riley's friends, he'd get them to tell him the whole truth about Riley and his past.

## Chapter Five

In the end, they were able to get Riley stabilized without a transfusion. It'd taken a lot of hard work by Jacyn and Doc to get to that point, however, and by the time it was over, even Colin felt drained.

After they left to go see to other patients, Colin slowly approached the bed and gazed down at Riley. He'd yet to regain consciousness, but at least the blue tint no longer ringed his full lips. He still looked way too pale for Colin's liking though.

Colin reached out and smoothed Riley's hair away from his face. He allowed his hand to linger, savoring the sensation of finally being able to touch the man he'd grown to care so much about.

Daniel quietly approached. Someone must have alerted him that Riley was in the infirmary. They stood in silence for a few moments, Daniel studying Colin while Colin continued to stroke Riley's hair.

"You were right. I do love him. Very much so,"

Colin finally said.

"I know."

"I'm done with distancing myself from him, too. I almost lost him because of it."

"I figured that one out, too."

"If you want to strip my title of mentor away, I'll understand. I don't give a rat's ass about that anymore."

"No, you'll still get that title. I don't think Riley will listen to anyone else."

Colin gave a bitter laugh. "He doesn't listen to me either."

"I think you're wrong about that. I've seen the way he looks at you. You're his hero."

"Some hero. He almost died today and our last conversation would have been an argument."

Daniel put a comforting hand on Colin's shoulder. "I think if you really open up to him and give things between the two of you a chance, you'll be the best thing that's ever happened for him."

Colin snorted. "Yeah, because I've done such a bang up job so far."

Raised voices from the other room made both Hawks look up in surprise.

"I got here as fast as I could. It's not like I live at headquarters like most of you do. It takes a while to drive here from my house," said a voice Colin recognized as Trevor. "Well, I couldn't exactly show up there. Not since Colin already saw me with Riley. The damn Hawk would have suspected something for sure," Noah replied.

"Maybe we should just go to Colin and tell him everything," Gage interjected.

The Hawk must have headed straight to the infirmary the moment he came in from his extended mission.

"Yeah, because he's been doing such a great job by Riley so far," Ranger drawled sarcastically.

"Besides, Riley made me promise not to say anything. He's afraid if the truth gets out, the Hawks will treat him even worse," Noah stressed.

"I don't see how it can get any worse," Ranger snapped. "I just wish Colin would let Riley move into Mitchell's. At least then, he'd have me and Noah there to watch his back. We all know Riley won't ever stand up to those jerks on his own. He just doesn't have it in him to be that aggressive. Colin should intervene and do something to stop it."

"Colin doesn't even know about the verbal abuse Riley is suffering from." Noah snorted, "The Hawk doesn't care enough to actually watch to see how the others are treating Riley."

"I didn't know about that either," Gage defended.

Hearing this, gave Colin some measure of

comfort to know one of his Hawks was standing up for him.

"You've been on a mission for months so that's understandable. Colin's been around, he just didn't give a damn," Noah seethed.

"Do you think Riley's been cutting for a while, or is this a one-time incident?" Gage asked.

"My guess is he's been doing it for at least a couple weeks. We just didn't notice this time because he can shift and heal the wounds now."

Colin's heart lurched at the thought of Riley suffering in silence for that long. Ranger and Noah were both right. There was no way in hell he should have missed the others mistreating Riley so badly. The worst thing of all was that Riley had tried to ask for help not hours before, but Colin had been too stubborn to hear him.

"God, I hope it doesn't get as bad as last time." Trevor sighed.

*Last time?* Colin exchanged glances with Daniel.

"We'll just have to keep a better eye on him. From now on, no matter where Riley goes, one of us is by his side. I don't care if it's to the can or shower," Ranger ordered.

When all the others readily agreed, Colin had enough of their interference, no matter how well meaning it may be.

"Better yet, why don't you tell me what in the fuck is going on so I can take better care of my novice?" Colin stepped into the waiting room.

It gave him a little satisfaction to see all the looks of shock and horror thrown in his direction. Daniel stepped into the room as well, but didn't say anything. He just stood behind Colin and let his glare speak of his brotherly support.

Gage opened his mouth to say something, but clamped his lips together when Ranger shot him a shut-the-hell-up look. That only served to make Colin more pissed and determined.

"This doesn't concern you," Ranger replied coolly, showing off his alpha streak.

"I'm sorry, but I have to disagree with that one. Especially since it concerns Riley."

"If you were really that interested in his wellbeing, you would have been around more to stop your Hawks from making him their bitch," Noah shot back.

"Not all of the Hawks have been mean to him, just a small group of them," Gage quickly pointed out.

"Yeah, and that small group has messed with Riley's head so bad that he's afraid to even leave his room anymore," Noah retorted.

"I thought he did that because he didn't like interacting with us," Colin said, his chest growing heavy with guilt.

Trevor cut in. "No, he did it because the others always demeaned him. That's not all either. They

also threatened to spit into his food so he couldn't even get a decent meal anymore."

"So how did he eat? I know he's been banned from the feline cafeteria," Colin asked.

"He hasn't been. Or maybe you didn't notice he's been losing weight?" Ranger all but shouted.

Colin leveled his gaze at Gage. "I want names of all the Hawks who've been making Riley's life hell. I don't care what you have to do to get them, but I want a list by the end of tomorrow night."

"Or else what? You'll throw him off the roof like you threatened to do with Riley so many times," Ranger bit out.

Just when Colin hadn't thought he could feel like a bigger ass, Ranger had to bring that up.

"That's not fair," Gage cut in. "He was only doing that to help Riley get over his fear of heights. Kind of like in the wild where the mama bird nudges her chicks from the nest so they can learn to fly."

"So tell me, Hawk, did that little tactic work for you?" Ranger tilted his head to the side.

Colin didn't answer because they all damn well knew it hadn't. "Look, I'm not going to argue that I haven't fucked up. Nobody knows more than I do that I've messed up as far as Riley is concerned, but that's all going to change."

"Why? Because it's in bad form to have your novices bleeding out?" Ranger sneered.

"No, because I care too much about him to let anything happen to him." When a barrage of skeptical looks met that announcement, Colin amended, "Not anything more."

"How are you going to protect him when you're not even at the headquarters half the time?" Trevor challenged.

"I'm moving in tonight."

Colin didn't add he planned on going so far as to move into the same room as Riley. After coming so close to losing the Eagle, he wasn't prepared to let the kid out his sight any time soon.

Ranger sent Gage a look, clearly a silent command for the Hawk to watch over Riley, too. While it went against all protocol for the wolf to question Colin's words, Colin didn't blame him. He knew full well how much he'd let Riley down.

"Now, who's going to tell us about what happened the last time Riley acted this way?" Daniel asked in a hard voice.

The friends all exchanged uneasy glances before Noah said, "I can't. I promised Riley I wouldn't."

"I didn't," Gage cut in. When they all gaped at him, he added, "I'm sorry, guys, I know pack stick together, but I have to keep Riley safe, too."

"He may hate you for this," Noah warned.

"I know, but better he lives and hates me, then wind up dead, or worse, captured again." Gage nibbled on his bottom lip for a few minutes before beginning. "You should know first off that most of what Riley does isn't his fault. Yeah, it may be him who's acting out and all, but he can't help himself. He usually ends up regretting his actions after, too."

"Take that time he fucked the twins for example," Trevor added. "That's not like Riley at all. He's always been the shyest out of all of us. When we used to live in the apartment, he never walked around half-dressed like some of us did. One time, I accidently busted in on him while he was in the shower and he almost died from embarrassment. So for him to get naked and dirty in front of a cast of Hawks is a complete personality one eighty."

"There is no way Riley would have normally done that," Gage added with such a certainty Colin had no trouble believing it.

Noah spoke up in a halting tone, as if he felt bad for betraying Riley's confidence even that much. "Plus the water thing is starting up again. He insisted on going to the fountain again today."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Daniel demanded.

"The last time Riley almost drowned was when he broke into a high school pool. Plus he was arrested for public disorderly another time when he tried to run through a car wash," Trevor said. "Let's not forget the time he drove his car off a dock and into a lake," Gage added.

"How come nobody ever told me this before?" Colin thundered.

Maybe if they hadn't been so worried about keeping Riley's secrets, then the whole cutting episode could have been avoided. While Colin admired them for wanting to protect their friend, he also wanted to shake them for being so stupid.

"Because we all thought he'd gotten better. It wasn't until the incident in the rec room that we began to suspect he was sliding again," Trevor said.

"Then when he attacked the salad bar, we knew for certain," Ranger added.

"And yet you still didn't tell me anything?" Colin seethed.

"We didn't know whether or not we could trust you." Ranger narrowed his eyes. "In fact, we still don't know."

"Of course you can trust me. I only want the best for him."

"Hmmm...maybe, but your past behavior doesn't make me inclined to believe you."

"What do I have to do, give you a damn contract signed in blood?"

"No, just answer one thing for me. Even after hearing all of this stuff, do you still care about him?" Colin blinked in confusion a few times. "Of course I do. None of that junk makes a difference to me. He's still my Riley."

My Riley. Wow, how easily those words slipped from his mouth. What's more, it felt so damn right saying them.

A layer of distrust lifted from Ranger's gaze. "Prove it to me. Just know this, if you hurt him in any way, I'll take him and we'll leave. I'm done watching him suffer."

Colin knew without a doubt Ranger would go through with that threat, too. Just as he knew that if that were to happen, nothing would stop him from following. He turned to Daniel. "Can you have somebody move a bigger bed into Riley's room?"

Daniel raised his brows in surprise. "You're going to be sleeping with him?"

"Yeah, until we figure out what's going on, I'm not leaving his side."

"He's not going to like that," Noah warned. "Not the sleeping together part, but rather, you hovering over him. Riley's always liked his space."

"Too bad because he's now stuck with me all the time. I'll handcuff him to my side if necessary."

Daniel nodded. "I'll have the bed in the room by the time Riley gets released from the infirmary. I'll also start making some inquires of my own as to who has been giving the kid a hard time. While you may be his mentor, I'm the cast leader and it pisses me off to know that some Hawks may have been responsible for driving Riley to do this to himself."

His brother's voice shook with anger. While Daniel may be pretty easy going, he could be dangerous to tangle with. Colin didn't envy the assholes because once he found out who they were, Daniel would be coming down hard on them.

Colin nodded his thanks to Daniel, then went back into the hospital room. Sinking into a chair next to Riley's bed, he reached out and began to stroke Riley's hair.

"I'm so sorry," Colin whispered, unconsciously echoing Riley's earlier words.

Riley's lids flickered open. He gazed blearily around the room, but his eyes cleared as he honed in on Colin. "What happened?"

Still stroking Riley's hair, Colin replied, "You had a little trouble in the shower today."

Riley's brow creased before a slight flush came over his cheeks, "Oh, yeah." A silence stretched between them before Riley nibbled on his bottom lip and added in a raspy, slightly whimpering voice, "Shit."

"Shh...." Colin soothed. "I'm here now and it's

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going to be okay. I'm not going to let things go as far as they did last time. I'll protect you from everything, I promise."

## Chapter Six

Riley's blood froze as both the bad and good implications from Colin's words sank in. A huge, huge, part of him wanted to let out a great big, yea over hearing Colin say that he was going to be there for him, another part of Riley wanted to shrivel up and die. For Colin to make that promise, he must have known at least part of Riley's shameful secret.

"I didn't mean to do something so stupid," Riley said, his gut twisting with remorse.

He bit back a sob. Why was he always doing this kind of crap, especially when he always ended up regretting the episodes later? He swallowed against the lump in his throat as he searched Colin's face for disgust or hate. All Riley found was gentle acceptance and a tenderness he'd never thought his mentor capable of.

"Where you trying to kill yourself?" Colin asked as he stroked Riley's hair.

That part confused Riley most of all. The last

time he'd checked, Colin still was enforcing the no touching rule. So for him now to be petting Riley made no sense.

"Not when I first started," Riley decided to confess.

"What happened to change it?"

"I just wanted to find some real peace for the first time in my life."

"And you think you can only do that by dying?"

"As soon as I made the cuts to my wrist, I changed my mind. I tried to shift and heal, but it didn't work this time." He realized he'd made a mistake as soon as Colin cocked a brow.

"This time? How often have you been cutting?"

Riley took a deep breath. Here it comes. Once Colin heard the truth, he'd probably toss the crazy Eagle out on his ass. "A lot. Sometimes more than once a day."

"Why?"

God, how to explain it to somebody on the outside? While it made perfect sense inside Riley's head, whenever he tried to enlighten somebody else, it always ended up coming out wrong. He decided to go with, "It makes me feel good."

Colin's brow creased, but he continued to caress Riley's hair, so that must mean he wasn't totally disgusted. That gave Riley the courage to confess more. "Sometimes I get so tired, I don't want to get out of bed, ever. Then, other days, I feel like nothing could stop me—that I could take on the Ravens, the slavers and every other asshole in the world."

When Colin didn't say anything for the longest time, Riley felt a well of panic fill up. "If you want me to leave the cast, I understand. I know that nobody likes having a defective shifter hanging around."

"What would make you ever think something like that?"

"I saw the way everybody treated Shane. Even now, some people can't stand to even be in the same room as him."

"That's because at one time or another, he's individually threatened every member of the coalition or cast."

Riley rolled that one over in his head. "I guess I can see your point. Just the other day, he told Thomas that he'd shave off his mane if the Lion ever touched his gun again."

"Don't take this wrong, because I actually do like Shane, but you're nothing like him."

Then Colin did the most shocking thing of all. He leaned down and pressed their lips together. The kiss was brief, almost over before Riley even realized it'd began, but it still stole his breath away.

"What was that for?" Riley asked.

He raised a hand to touch his now tingling lips. A warm sensation pooled in his stomach as his heart fluttered in excitement.

"I can't fight it anymore," Colin said, his gaze searching Riley's face.

"Fight what?"

"The way I feel about you."

For the first time in his life, Riley felt real, genuine hope blossom in his chest. "Please tell me that it's not something like disgust or hate? Because if it is and you're still kissing me, that's just messed up."

Colin gave a small chuckle before kissing Riley again. "I could never be disgusted or hate you."

"You don't know that for sure. I've done some really stupid things over the years."

"If you're talking about the time when you still lived with Ranger and the others, then I already know and it hasn't changed the way I feel about you at all."

Riley felt tears well up in his eyes. "I don't know why I do some of the things I do. What's worse, I don't know how to stop myself from doing them. I'm so scared."

Colin reached down and pulled Riley into an embrace.

Riley closed his eyes and let himself sink into the comfort Colin offered.

"You're not facing it alone. This time I'm with

you, and I'm not going anywhere."

"I don't deserve you," Riley whispered even as he clutched onto Colin's arms.

"Now why would you say that? Of course you do."

"That day with the twins, I was so mad at you. After you pushed me away while we were on the roof, I wanted to find a way to prove to you that I was desirable. That at least somebody wanted me. So I threw myself at them and all but begged them to fuck me." Riley took in a shuddering breath. "Oh god, I can't believe some of the things I let them do to me."

Colin held him tighter. "It's okay, babe."

"No, it's not. I let them make a spectacle out me and now I'm considered the cast whore. No wonder they hate me so much."

"Who hates you? I know it's not the whole cast, but rather certain members who've been targeting you. Tell me their names and I'll put a stop to it."

Fear sliced through Riley as he recalled some of the darker threats Salvador promised if Riley ever turned them in. Trembling, he buried his face further into Colin's chest. "Do we have to talk about that now? I'd much rather you kissed me again."

He could sense Colin's reluctance, but in the end, the Hawk said, "Fine, but I want you to promise to come immediately to me if anyone tries

to hurt you."

Riley nodded, although he had no intention of doing so. One of Salvador's favorite warnings had been that he'd hurt Colin if Riley ever said anything. That simply could not happen. Riley cared too much for the Hawk to ever put him in harm's way. If that meant Riley had to put up with a little abuse, then so be it. What's a few lumps more?

"It won't matter anyways since I have no intention of leaving your side anytime soon," Colin announced.

Riley jerked back, both shocked and alarmed by the announcement. "What?"

"I'm moving in with you."

Riley left the comfort of Colin's arms and retreated to the far side of the bed, his mind racing at the turn of events. "I don't need a babysitter."

Colin looked pointedly in the bandages covering both of Riley's arms. "I have to disagree with you on that one."

"So, you're just going to come in and take over the one aspect of my life you already don't have control of—my privacy. Why don't you just toss me into a cage and get it over with?"

He expected that suggestion to get him into hot water with Colin, so when the man just gave a gentle smile, Riley's confusion ratcheted up a couple notches. Forget me. This guy is the one who's

fucking nuts.

"I don't think a cage is necessary, although I wouldn't rule out handcuffs." Colin leaned in closer. "But only in a fun way, I promise."

Desire shot through Riley even as he let out a gasp of outrage. "Okay, you're complete change of attitude is freaking me out way more than my own behavior. What's gotten into you? Not hours ago, you were once again reminding how important it was that we keep our relationship professional."

"That was before I got my head out of my ass and realized how important you were to me," Colin paused, pressed his lips together, before adding, "Check that, I always knew what you meant to me, but today was the first time I was willing to accept it. When I saw you in that shower, bleeding and half dead, it nearly killed me, too. Just the thought of losing my mate before he found out how much he meant to me scared me shitless."

Riley glanced up at the IV bag suspended over his bed. "Wow, I wonder what in the hell they're doping me up with because it's giving me some wicked hallucinations. Otherwise here is now way in hell that you would ever get this sentimental with me, let alone spout off with a word like mate."

Riley narrowed his eyes, peering closer at the

bag for several seconds before realizing he wouldn't have a way of knowing even if they had spiked his IV. It's not like he had any medical experience at all, aside from a few *College Boy Physicals* porn videos.

Colin reached out, grabbed Riley by the shoulder, and very gently brought him in closer. "It's not the drugs playing games with you. I really said that."

"Won't you get in trouble for messing around with your novice?"

"Daniel gave his consent."

Riley fiddled with his IV tubing. "Dang, if I'd known that me trying to off myself would have garnered this kind of reaction from you, I'd have done it a lot sooner."

Colin let out a low growl, the sound shooting straight to Riley's cock. "Promise you won't ever try something like this again."

"I promise," Riley vowed.

He only hoped he'd be able to keep his word.

Even after they managed to stabilize Riley, Doc insisted that he stay overnight for observation. While that was the last thing he wanted, Riley didn't make it an issue. As it was, Jacyn was already giving him too many suspicious looks for comfort.

Riley thought back to the one time he'd spent

some time in a mental institution. It'd when he'd been sixteen and completely unaware there were shifters, let alone that *he* was one.

The meds they'd pumped into him made him sicker than hell. Looking back, Riley now realized that was due to his shifter DNA rejecting the drugs. At the time, it'd been so bad that he'd begged them to kill him to put him out of his misery.

Thus, Riley wasn't too eager for a repeat of that particular chapter of his life. Especially since the doctors hadn't been able to help curb his mood swings. It'd gotten so bad that his foster mother eventually pulled him out of school and continued his education at home.

Jacyn brought breakfast, but Riley felt too nervous to eat. He didn't look forward to having to go back to the cast side of the building, where everyone already knew what'd happened. Riley held no delusions that he wasn't the talk of the cast, after the dramatic showing of Colin carrying him away, soaking wet and bleeding.

"You need to eat something," Colin admonished as he came up to the bed.

He'd stayed by Riley's side the entire time, only leaving for the occasional phone call or potty break. Having the Hawk all to himself had been the only blessing for them forcing him to stay overnight.

"Sorry, I never did care for oatmeal. My foster mom used to serve it every day, too. She'd make me eat every bite, even if I had to gag my way through it," Riley said as he stirred the thick concoction.

"Did she always mistreat you that way?"

"No, mostly, she treated me like some perfect little porcelain doll that was to be looked at, but never touched. Like my only job was to look pretty and nothing else mattered."

"That doesn't sound like a fun way to live."

Riley shrugged. "It could have been a lot worse. Trevor's foster dad used to beat the shit out of him. At least Mimi never did that."

Colin cocked his head to the side. "Mimi?"

"That's what she used to make me call her. She was a bit off, but she wasn't too bad."

"Off how?"

"She used to keep this massive collection of live birds. There were cages everywhere, even in the bathroom and my bedroom."

"If I ask you a question, will you tell me the truth?" Colin asked gently.

Riley shrugged. "Since you already pretty much know everything about me, I don't see the harm."

"Are you sure Mimi didn't know that you were an Eagle shifter?"

Riley froze, shocked at how quickly Colin managed to figure that one out. "I didn't used to

think so, but the more I look back on it, the more I suspect that maybe she did."

"How did you end up living with her? Did the State place you in her care?"

Oh, they were so not going there. While Riley didn't mind ripping open his own misdeeds, he'd be damned he'd expose anybody else. He pushed the tray away and replied shortly, "She took me in after my parents were murdered. I don't know for certain the logistics of how I ended up with her."

Colin looked as if he was going to push the subject, but in the end, he just nodded and took the tray. "Okay, fair enough. You ready to go home?"

"No," Riley replied bluntly.

Colin leaned down and gave him a soft kiss. "Relax, not everyone is waiting to make fun of you. I've had several Hawks calling me to check up on you?"

"Who? Gage and Garrett?"

"Yes, but I also had at least a dozen others. They're really worried about you."

Riley rolled his eyes. "More likely they're worried that I'll come back."

For some strange reason, that earned him another kiss. Not that Riley was complaining or anything.

"It doesn't matter anymore because they won't have any choice but to accept you anymore," Colin said.

"Why's that?"

"Because you're my mate. That automatically means you belong."

Colin said those words with such certainty that Riley believed them—that was, until all the memories of his past experiences came crashing back. Somehow, Riley didn't see Salvador or any other member of the cast ever accepting the apeshit crazy Eagle shifter.

## Chapter Seven

Once he sprang Riley from the infirmary and they got back to the Hawk side of the building, Colin purposely led the way to the kitchens. Since it was early, they were still serving breakfast. He smiled to himself when he noted how full the room was. Perfect, just the way he wanted it. Turning, he nudged Riley toward the line, "Go get something to eat."

Riley's brow creased in confusion. "Why?"

"Because you never did eat the breakfast Jacyn brought and you need your daily protein."

"Are you trying to say I'm too skinny?" Riley demanded as he looked down at his slender frame.

"Not at all. I just want you to take better care of yourself."

Riley narrowed his eyes. "I almost liked it better when you were threatening to throw me off roofs. At least I understood your actions better."

Colin laughed. "Is it so hard to believe that

somebody may actually care about you?"

"Yeah, nobody has ever seen me as more than a pretty decoration or their airheaded, blond friend."

Colin felt a rush of anger over those words. He and Daniel hadn't spoken for several years after a bitter disagreement and Colin still hurt when he thought about that time of isolation. From the sounds of it, nobody really knew the real Riley and the Eagle felt lonely for it. It made Colin want to go back in time so he could tell Mimi just what he thought about her parenting skills.

"Go, get some food," Colin urged.

When he noted the uneasy glance Riley shot at the kitchen crew, Colin's worst fears were realized, Chip and Harvey were part of the group who'd been terrorizing Riley. Colin decided then the best way to handle it was some good old public humiliation. That way, maybe the others would think twice before they messed with his mate.

"Go ahead, get in line," Colin urged. When Riley still hesitated, he added, "Trust me on this one, please."

Riley hesitated for only a beat before he gave a small nod. "Okay, if you insist."

While Riley went to the front of the line, Colin stayed back, deliberately keeping out a sight. Since the surrounding conversations were so loud, Colin couldn't pick up exactly what was being said, but it didn't take a genius to figure out when they started to give Riley a hard time.

The two assholes began by smirking, but soon gave way to filthy looks. Harvey said something that caused Riley to flinch in response, while Chip took things further. After darting a glance around to make sure none of the Hawks in the dining room were watching, Chip leaned down and spat in the Eagle's food.

The fact that Riley didn't react spoke volumes. It let Colin know the bullying had been going on for so long that Riley had given up on fighting back. He'd just gotten to the stage where he took it without saying anything.

Storming up to the pair, Colin pinned a hard glare on Chip. It gave Colin a grim sense of satisfaction to see the other Hawk's pale expression as he swallowed loudly. Harvey tried to slink away, but one gesture from Colin halted the asshole in his tracks.

"Riley, go find a seat," Colin ordered, working hard to keep the fury from his voice lest Riley think it was directed at him.

When Riley reached out to take the food, Colin shook his head, "Leave that with me."

"Yes, Colin," Riley demurred as he turned, then left the line.

As soon as Riley was out of fallout range, Colin

picked up the tray and hurled it at Chip and Harvey. They ducked just in time to avoid the tray clocking them in the head. The tray hit the wall behind them with a loud, wet sounding bang.

Food sprayed everywhere, some of it slowly sliding down the wall and dripping onto the floor. The entire room fell silent as Chip and Harvey gaped at him, their eyes wide with terror.

"Give me one reason why I shouldn't take you both out back and beat your asses," Colin said in a deceptively calm voice.

"I don't know what we did wrong," Chip replied, a whining edge to his tone.

"Don't be coy, you little shit! It's just going to piss me off even more and, trust me, you don't want that."

"We were just having some fun with him," Harvey added.

It took every bit of Colin's self-control not to leap over the counter and punch the idiot out. He took a deep breath, then said, "You call contaminating somebody's food fun?"

"What's the big deal? He's just a flipping Eagle. It's not like he's actually one of us," Chip said.

"The minute Daniel took Riley into the cast, he became one of us. By treating Riley as anything less, you dishonor Daniel, the cast and me. Most of all, you disrespect Riley and the trust he gave us when he came here."

"Like I give a shit what that stupid tart thinks," Chip sneered.

Growling low in his throat, Colin leaned over the counter. "If I ever hear you talk about him that way again, I'll take you down. I won't make it quick either. I'll drag it out so you have plenty of time to suffer while you regret every little thing you've ever done to my mate."

"Did you just say mate?" Chip asked.

"Oh shit, we're so dead," Harvey whimpered.

Colin gave a tight smile. "Now, I need you to make up two trays for me and they both better be made to perfection."

Harvey rushed to do as commanded while Chip continued to stare at Colin as if he'd grown another leg. Colin cocked his head to the side. "Was my order too confusing for you? If you can't handle your duties here, I'm sure Daniel or I could find you a more suitable job...perhaps working as a target in the firing range."

"But...he's an Eagle," Harvey stammered.

"No, he's my Eagle and nobody better forget that fact."

Colin grabbed the trays and spun around to find Riley and the rest of the Hawks staring in shocked silence. While there were one or two disapproving glares tossed in his direction, there were many more smiles.

Riley rushed forward, stood on tiptoe and

pressed a quick, shy kiss to Colin's lips. The sweetest blush covered Riley's cheeks as he ducked his head down. Yeah, this was a definite difference from the Riley in the rec room.

"And you're *my* Hawk," Riley declared in a slightly shaky voice.

A thrill of ownership went through Colin as he gazed down at Riley, knowing that this small Eagle wanted him. That Riley had chosen him above all others gave Colin a high that no other victory had ever achieved.

He thrust the trays at the nearest Hawk, then reached out and grabbed Riley's wrist. "Fuck breakfast. I have something better in mind for us to do."

"What?" Riley asked as he scrambled to keep up.

Colin only paused long enough to toss a wicked grin over his shoulder. "I think it's time for me to make you my mate in every sense of the word."

Riley's gaze darkened with passion. "Oh, are you sure?"

"I've never been more certain of anything in my life."

They'd made it a few steps more before Riley whispered, "Do you think the others knew what we were leaving to do?"

"Dear goddess, I hope so. I want them all to know who you belong to now."

"Great," Riley groaned. "Now they're going to think I'm an even bigger whore than before."

They reached the room. Colin stopped, turned and lopped an arm around Riley's waist, bringing the smaller man in so their bodies were flush against each other.

"This isn't like last time, because this isn't some quick hookup. Now that you're mine, I don't want to see anyone ever touch you again."

"Damn it, but I love this new possessive streak you're showing," Riley breathed as he ran his tongue over his lips.

Colin shifted his hold so he could run the palm of his hand over Riley's ass. "Good, because it's never going away."

Riley let out a small whimper as he rubbed his hard cock against Colin's thigh.

Feeling the proof of his mate's desire mixed with the scent of arousal rolling off Riley almost made Colin forget himself. He barely restrained himself from pinning Riley against the wall and taking him right in the hallway.

As if sensing his urges, Riley wrapped his hands around Colin's arms then said, "Can we take this to the bedroom? The cast has already seen way too much of me."

Colin gave Riley a deep, heated kiss before he forced himself to pull away, and punch in the code for the door. Once they got inside and were in

total privacy, he reached out and pulled Riley back into his arms.

This time, Riley returned the kiss with an eagerness that had Colin moaning. Riley let out a little humming sound of his own before he leaned in, his tongue darting out to sweep the inside of Colin's mouth.

Colin tried to pull away and regain some control of the kiss, but Riley refused to back down. With a low growl, he then nipped the bottom of Colin's lip in an aggressive manner that strangely made Colin's inner predator cry in approval.

Thus, Colin held back and let Riley control every nip, lick and caress. It wasn't until Riley finally broke the kiss that Colin took charge again. Nodding to the center of the room, he asked, "What do you think of the new bed?"

Riley let out a short burst of laughter. "I think we may need a bigger bedroom. That thing is so huge we don't have any room to walk around anymore."

"I guess you have a point. I'll have to ask Daniel about getting a larger room."

Riley grinned. "So, it's just like that. You ask and Daniel just gives it to you?"

"Not all the time, but since we're mates, he'll make this concession."

Colin picked Riley up and tossed him on the bed.

Once he got his bearings, Riley lay back on his elbows and gazed up at Colin.

"Take off your clothes for me," Riley requested, his gaze hungrily eating up Colin.

It'd never been Colin's thing to put on a show for somebody, but damned if he could refuse any request Riley made. Especially when the man's lips were swollen oh-so-enticingly from their kisses. Riley palmed himself though his jeans and added, "Please? I've been waiting for so long to see how you look naked."

Colin gave in, slowly peeling off his clothes. He knew he probably didn't put on the best strip show, but Riley didn't seem to mind. He even let out a moan of appreciation when Colin bent over to take off his socks and shoes.

"Your body is so hot," Riley breathed as he continued to rub himself off.

Colin gazed down at Riley, desire rushing over him at the sensual picture Riley presented—hair messed up just a bit, his eyes glazed with passion as he pleasured himself. The way his lithe body looked both so sexy and graceful at the same time should be illegal.

"Does my Eagle need some special attention?" Colin teased.

Riley bit his bottom lip, a soft groan bursting from his chest. "Yes, I need it so badly. Come and fuck me, Colin. Make me yours."

# Chapter Eight

Riley's cock felt ready to burst from his jeans as he gazed up at the sheer perfection that was Colin. The Hawk managed to fulfill every single one of Riley's wet dreams and then some. Though he had the thinner build that most Hawks favored, there was a fair bit of muscles, too. Riley's mouth watered from the need to lick every one of those dips and ridges, too.

Colin climbed onto the bed, but made no move to touch Riley, yet.

"I'm not going to fuck you," Colin declared even as he stroked his own cock.

Riley made a sound of distress. "What? Why?"

"I will make love to you, however," Colin promised as he smoothed one hand down Riley's chest.

"Okay, I'm good with that." Riley tried to come off as his normal, everyday teasing self, but the way his voice squeaked no doubt gave him away.

"Please, tell me you have lube somewhere in

here."

Riley nodded over to the nightstand before he finally gave into temptation and stretched up a hand to touch Colin. Using a slow, exploratory touch, he trailed his fingers down Colin's shoulder to his ribs and then finally the curve of his hip.

"You feel so real," Riley replied in amazement. Colin laughed. "Did you expect something else?"

"After all the times I dreamed about this happening, only to wake up alone and disappointed in the morning, yes I did," Riley admitted.

Colin reached under Riley's shirt and gave his side a good pinch. Riley let out a yelp of pain. "What was that for?"

"So you'll know that you're not dreaming," Colin replied with a wicked grin. "Now get undressed while I get the lube."

Riley scrambled to obey, his movements so clumsy and comical that it was a wonder Colin didn't laugh until he pissed kittens. Yet for some insane reason, for once, his ineptitude only brought a tender smile from Colin.

He didn't know what'd caused the change of heart from Colin. Why the Hawk decided to claim him, the crazy Eagle, as his mate, but Riley wasn't going to let this opportunity pass by. For once, a small sliver of happiness was within his grasp and, damn it, Riley was going to hold on with both hands and enjoy every second of it while it lasted.

Once all the clothes were off, Riley couldn't help but feel a bit inadequate. Whereas Colin and most of the other shifters were gifted with these muscular, god-like builds, Riley felt like the runt of the litter. He was skinnier, smaller and weaker and, never before had he been more aware of those faults.

Adding to all that was the fact that he still wore the damning bandages. The white starkness that was a badge of shame. He stared at them as his gut filled with the all-too-familiar sensation of regret.

Colin leaned over and gently grabbed both of Riley wrists in one hand. "Don't think about that now."

After giving Riley a kiss, Colin lifted Riley's arms until his wrists were over his head. "Keep your hands here and don't move them until I give you permission."

"What if I have an itch?" Riley asked.

That bit of snarkiness earned him a not-sogentle love bite on his right nipple. Riley cried out at the mixture of pain and pleasure.

"Okay, got the warning, no itching," Riley moaned, before grinning. "Maybe you better give me another caution, just to make sure I got the message. You know how bad of a novice I can be sometimes."

Colin's grin said he saw right through Riley's game, but he still bent down and bit Riley, this time on his left nipple. Riley arched up, a cry slipping past his lips. "Oh damn, that feels so good."

"I'm glad to hear that, because I plan on biting and licking every inch of you."

Colin then proceeded to do that, working his way down Riley's front. Just when Riley thought he couldn't take any more, Colin flipped him over and gave his back the same treatment, paying particular attention to Riley's ass cheeks.

By the time Colin finished, Riley was reduced to a nearly incoherent babbling mess of *oh*, *gods* and *please*, *mores!* When Colin finally rolled Riley to his side, then reached for the lube, Riley wanted to weep with relief. Okay, maybe he didn't *really* want to cry because it would be too much drama even for him, but Riley did feel a big, fat heavy dose of happiness.

He quickly found Colin wasn't done teasing. After coating his fingers with lube, Colin stretched out behind Riley. He began to whisper the dirtiest things into Riley's ear, things Riley never imagined coming from the straight-laced second in command.

At the same time, Colin began to stretch Riley's

ass, using first one finger then two, before finally shoving three inside.

Riley gasped at the wonderful burning sensation.

"You're so fucking tight," Colin moaned.

A heat came over Riley's cheeks. "It's because I haven't done anything other than that one time—at least not since I've come to live with the cast."

Colin lined up the tip of his cock to Riley's hole. "And there better never ever be anybody else."

Riley hissed in pleasure as Colin pushed inside him. "I promise it will only be you from now on."

"Lower your arms. I want to see you touch yourself," Colin whispered in Riley's ear.

That was one order Riley was only too happy to obey. While Colin thrust into him, Riley ran his hands over his chest, playing with his sensitive nipples before moving down to his cock. Wrapping one hand around his erection, Riley began to stroke himself in time with Colin's fucking...oops, lovemaking.

Then Colin went all feral, biting Riley on the side of the throat, right where his shoulder met with his neck. It wasn't a love nip, either, but a full-on, teeth-filled bite. Riley screamed out in ecstasy, as the hardest orgasm of his very-short sex life slammed into him. His cock jerked, the pulsated hot streams of cum coating his fingers and stomach.

That must have been all Colin needed, because he let out a cry, the noise muffled because he was still teeth-locked onto Riley. Colin's hand shot out and grabbed Riley by the hip, the Hawk's grip almost bruising.

"Mine," Colin growled.

He gave one last thrust before he tensed, and gave a long moan as his cock filled Riley's ass. Riley savored the sensation of having Colin mark him on the inside as well as the bite on his neck.

"Yours," Riley agreed as he came back down to earth.

They stayed that way for a few moments while they caught their breath. After, Colin got up, he grabbed a washcloth and cleaned Riley thoroughly. Once done, Colin tossed the rag to the side and climbed back into bed, pulling Riley into his arms.

Riley snuggled into Colin's chest and relished the feeling of safety he found only in his mate's embrace. It made Riley finally to want share everything with Colin, even the stuff he kept secret from Ranger and the others.

It still took Riley a few moments to work up the courage. He nervously licked his lips before blurting, "I was four when my mother murdered the rest of my family."

Colin tensed, but didn't pull away, so Riley took that as a good sign. Still Riley held his breath

in anticipation. It's not exactly as if somebody dropped that kind of bombshell every day.

"It's okay, babe, you can tell me everything. I promise not to think less of you for it," Colin finally said.

Relief flooded Riley, making him feel ten pound lighter. He tilted his head so they could lock gazes. "I believe that. At least I do now."

"So, does that mean you're going to tell me the rest of the story?"

Riley nodded before forcing himself to continue, "I was in my bedroom with my twin, Xavier. We were playing with those big toddler-sized *Legos* when we heard the first gunshot. The loud noise scared us even though we didn't realize at the time what it was. Then the screaming began."

Riley shivered, his stomach rolling at the memories. "I wanted to see what was going on, but Xavier was too afraid to leave the room. So, I...I...I left him behind so I could go investigate." A small sob burst past Riley's lips. He still hated himself for making that damn mistake.

Colin pressed a soft kiss to his cheek, "You can't blame yourself for anything that happened that day. You were just a kid."

"I still miss him so much."

"I know you do."

Riley sniffed before continuing with the story.

"When I went out of the room, I nearly tripped over the bodies of my father and oldest brother. There was so much blood. It scared me so badly that I ran and hid behind the couch. I didn't leave that spot, even when I saw her go into my bedroom. I could hear Xavier crying my name right before the sound of gunfire sounded.

"She must have lost count. Since I had ten brothers and sisters, it would have been easy for her to do. So she didn't notice that she left one of us alive. After she finished killing the family, she shot herself in the head."

"How long were you there with the bodies before somebody found you?" Colin asked.

Riley shrugged. "I lost track of time. Eventually, Mimi came over for a visit and found me. She took me home with her and I stayed with her until I was seventeen and the Ravens found us. It wasn't until they killed her and then tried to capture me that I found out who I really was."

Colin gave Riley a tight hug. "Do you have any idea why your mother would murder her own family?"

A wave of nausea hit Riley. "She was like I am now, all over the place mood-wise. I still remember how she got us up at three in the morning one day so we could go out and help her clean the garage and basement. It didn't matter to her that we were kids who needed our sleep .All

she...all she cared about was getting the house clean."

"You said you had ten brothers and sisters?"
"Yeah"

"So that would make eleven of you total?"

Riley shot Colin a confused look. "Last time I checked that was the end result of ten plus one. I could double check with a first grader if you'd like."

That earned him a light pinch to the side. "Be good. I'm just trying to figure something out. While we were trying to research who your parents may be, we came across a case of a mass family killing, but there were only nine kids who died in that incident."

"Well, it can't be mine, since there would have been ten bodies. So it has to be another Eagle family, which just proves that crazy must be a part of an Eagle's DNA."

"Why would you think that?" Colin asked gently.

"How else would you explain me ending up exactly the same way as my mother?"

God, how it hurt for Riley to give voice to that question, but he knew he finally had to face the whole truth of what was going on inside him. He owed Colin at least that much.

Colin gave him a tight squeeze. "You are nothing like her."

"Yes, I am. The only difference is I only harm myself instead of lashing out at others." Riley took in a shuddering breath. "What if I only get worse? I don't want you to have to be saddled with all my problems for the rest of your life. It's not fair to you."

Colin gave a growl before he rolled them over, pinning Riley on his back. Colin glared down at him. "You can stop talking that way right now because I'm not going anywhere, ever. We'll figure out a way to get past this, I promise you."

Colin sounded so sure that Riley wanted to believe him. If only he could trust him more than all the whispers of doubt in his head. In the end, he nodded in agreement. Since he had Colin at his back, maybe, just maybe, this time would be different.

### Chapter Nine

The ven though it was still technically morning, Riley soon fell asleep. Colin took the opportunity to study his mate, savoring the feeling of finally having the Eagle in his arms, right where he belonged.

Though Colin hadn't thought it possible, Riley looked so much younger in slumber, the usual worry lines eased from his beautiful face. He had one hand curled under his cheek, the white bandage around his wrist a visible reminder of just how close Colin came to losing the man he loved.

Brushing Riley's hair away from his face, Colin thought back to the conversation they'd had after making love. Where a part of him was glad Riley finally felt close enough to share all his secrets, another part of him was terrified. While Colin had no problem facing Ravens or snake shifters, this was different because this enemy was invisible and came from within his Riley. Even worse, he

knew that Doc would be scrambling for answers as to how to help. Until only recently, it was mostly unheard of for there to be any mental illness in the shifter world.

Colin made a mental note that as soon as he had Riley's permission, he'd pin Doc down and talk about ways they could help stabilize Riley's condition. New or not, they'd figure out a way to make things better for his Eagle.

While he could have stayed in bed with Riley all day, he had to check something out. Riley's story about how his family died, rang some bells of familiarity in Colin. He felt certain that Riley's family was the same one they'd read about in all the old newspaper articles. There were just a few inconsistencies that Colin needed to figure out.

Since he knew Riley would be sleeping for a while, Colin gave his mate a soft kiss and then carefully slid out of bed. He quickly got dressed and, after one last longing look at Riley, Colin left to go find Carson, the feline coalition's top go-to guy when it came to finding information in the human world.

In the past, it would have grated on Colin to have to go to the felines for help, but he was willing to swallow his pride if it meant helping Riley. Since he rarely visited the Cheetah shifter, Colin made a few wrong turns before he finally found the feline's cramped office.

He knocked on the door, cringing when Carson called, "Only come in if you have a good name for a new porn site."

Colin poked in his head.

Carson rolled his kohl-lined eyes, "Damn, why did you come in? Birds never know any of the good sites. The last time one of your buddies shot me a recommendation, I had nightmares for weeks. Yet, people call me fucked up. At least I don't watch low budget, water play vids."

Colin paused, not knowing how one should reply to such an outlandish comment. But then everything about Carson was outlandish, from the way he dyed his hair, to the way he only wore black clothes.

In the end, Colin decided the best approach would be to ignore the weird comments and questions, and pray that he could keep the Cheetah on the track of normal conversation.

"Do you remember when we were doing research of recent Eagle activity and the only thing we could find was a human article about a family who was murdered?"

"Yes, they went by the human surname of Henson," a quiet voice from the corner piped in.

Colin turned and saw Carson's mate, Keegan, curled up on a battered couch. Yet another one of Mitchell's brother...and damn, how many relatives could one family have...he had the same

coloring as all his other siblings. Keegan was on the smaller side of the size spectrum, standing about the same height as Riley.

Carson beamed proudly. "Don't you love Cub's photographic memory?"

At that moment, Colin really did, but he decided to keep that opinion to himself. Carson had a reputation of being very protective of his mate. Until recently, Colin hadn't understood that trait. Now that he had Riley, he found himself actually relating to Carson, which had to be a first and probably a last.

"Yeah, that's the family. Is there any way you can bring up the crime photos from that house?" Colin asked.

Carson shrugged. "Sure, I saved them. It was a little harder than normal to get them, since the local authorities tried to hush it all up being it was shifter related."

While the government and many police agencies knew about the existence of shifter, the normal everyday citizen had no clue, which worked out better for all involved. The humans could continue to live with the naïve notion that monsters and other paranormal creatures were a myth and the shifters didn't have to worry about hunters coming after them.

Carson pulled up the pictures, various images showing up on the numerous computer monitors.

Colin narrowed his eyes as he carefully studied them.

"What are you looking for?" Keegan asked.

"Evidence that there was at least one survivor. Riley confided to me that his mother murdered his family, but the numbers aren't adding up. Riley insists that he had ten siblings, yet I only see the remains of nine."

"I know somebody who may be able to help. Just give me a second to grab him," Keegan offered before rushing from the room.

A loud crash of thunder sounded from outside, followed by the heavy pattering of rain hitting the roof of the headquarters. Colin ignored the distraction, too intent on unraveling the puzzle in front of him.

"I just wish I could figure this out. I feel as if the answer is right in front of me," Colin said.

"That's because it is."

Colin froze as he instantly recognized the newest speaker—Shane, AKA, the coalition's top assassin. While the guy didn't stand much bigger than Riley and had the most adorable eyes and angelic looking face, there was nobody Colin feared worse. Shane had this whole vibe about him that screamed he'd gladly slit the throat of anybody who crossed him.

While Shane may have mellowed some since he took Trevor as his mate, that only meant the feline

said *I'm sorry* before he killed you, then used your guts as his own homemade jump rope.

Shane came in and slowly walked around the room as he carefully studied the pictures, the only sounds in the room were the storm outside and the fans from the computer. After a torturous five minutes, Shane cocked his head to the side and asked, "So what do you want to know? The order in which the mother killed everybody? The place the one kid hid while he watched them die? When the human arrived to rescue the first kid? Or how long it took before the Ravens came and grabbed the second surviving child?"

"Second child?" Keegan gasped. "But that would mean that..."

"That Riley has a brother or sister somewhere out there," Colin finished grimly.

"We have another problem, kiddies," Carson announced as he looked at one of the monitors attached to security cameras.

"What now?" Colin asked.

"Your little Eagle is out in the parking lot."

Colin rushed forward to look himself. "That's impossible, I just left him less than an hour ago, and he was sound asleep."

"Well, he's awake now and it looks like he's having some fun."

As he studied the tiny image of Riley, Colin's heart lurched. Riley looked almost like a kid

who'd discovered mud puddles for the first time. He jumped and splashed his way through the rain—slicked pavement. From time to time, he threw his head back and opened his mouth in what looked to be a shout. Lightening slashed across the sky and Riley opened his arms up as if to embrace the electricity. He even hopped up and down a few times, almost like he wanted to get closer to the storm clouds.

"Oh, shit. You don't think he'll shift, do you?" Carson breathed, for once holding in his snarky comments.

"God, I hope not," Colin replied, his gut clenching in fear. He turned to Keegan. "Get Jacyn and Doc. Tell them Riley is having another..." He trailed off, at a loss as to how to explain.

"Manic episode?" Keegan offered. "I read a book on it once."

Of course, he did. Keegan went through research books the way his mate went through porn. Because of Keegan's photographic memory, he retained all the information, too.

Colin nodded. "Yeah, go with that. Just get them here fast."

"You should know that Riley's not going to want to go to the infirmary with them. He's likely to physically fight it," Keegan warned.

"I figured as much," Colin rasped.

He'd be lucky if Riley didn't end up hating him

for his interference. Colin also knew he couldn't continue to hope the situation would get better on its own either. Not with the destructive trail Riley continued to take.

"I'll go and try to talk him back into the building," Colin said.

He ran to the front of the building and rushed outside. Riley immediately sensed his presence, a huge dimple-filled smile breaking out over his wet face.

"Colin! You're here!"

Riley ran up and threw himself in Colin's arms. He then started talking so fast, the words tumbled over each other, "Oh, my God. Can you feel it? The rain is full of energy. If we shift and fly through it, we can go to the moon. Just think of it. We'll be able to go somewhere where Salvador and his buddies will never be able to reach us. We'll be safe and alone where nobody will ever be able to touch us. Better yet, we'll glow because of the way the moon's power will be shooting through us and making us super strong and stuff. We'll be like real-life superheroes."

Colin reached down and cupped Riley's face, tilting his head up just enough so they could look at each other without so much rain getting into Riley's face. Then Colin did the hardest thing of his life, he looked the man he loved in the eye and lied his ever living ass off.

"That sounds like a really fun idea. I just need to go inside and get a change of clothes first. I don't want to get to the moon and have nothing clean to wear tomorrow."

The smile faded only briefly from Riley's face. "Oh, I guess that makes sense. We should hurry up though before the rain goes away."

Colin took Riley by the hand and led him back to the door. The entire way, Riley continued to chatter, the words coming out so fast they began to run together even more.

They stepped inside and found Jacyn, Doc, Ranger, Noah, Trevor, Gage and Daniel all waiting for them. The smile completely faded from Riley's face, this time becoming replaced with a frown.

"What's going on?" he asked in a small voice.

"I just think it'll be a good idea for Doc to check you out," Colin soothed.

"But there's nothing wrong with me." "Riley, babe, you were threatening to shift and fly into a severe thunderstorm. You could have died," Colin soothed.

Riley hissed out a curse and jerked his hand free. "I already explained that I would have been okay. Better than okay, I would have been free."

"No, sweetie, you would have been hurt. Just like last time."

"I should have known that you didn't mean

those nice things you said to me. You just told me all those things to get me into bed. Now that you've screwed me, you're just like the others and now you're looking for a way to get rid of me."

Pain sliced through Colin as he tried to remind himself that this wasn't really Riley talking.

Jacyn took a step forward, "Come on with us, Riley. We'll give you something to sleep."

"I don't want to sleep, litter box breath. I want to fly."

Riley made another dash for the outside. Jacyn lunged forward and tackled him, the pair going down with a hard smack. Even though he was smaller, Riley still nearly managed to squirm free. Ranger joined in and helped Jacyn hold Riley down.

Every fiber of Colin wanted to rush forward and help his mate, especially. Especially when Riley began to cry.

"Please, Colin. Don't let them do this to me. I promise to be good."

Doc brought a cot around and they threw the still struggling Riley on top of it. Jacyn worked quickly to put Riley in a set of four-point restraints. Riley screamed as he bucked against the cot.

"You lied to me! You said you cared about me! If that was true, then you'd never let them do this to me!"

Each accusation felt like a physical blow to Colin. Strong arms came up from behind and held him in a comforting embrace. Colin didn't have to turn to know it was Daniel, offering his support and love. With a sob of his own, Colin sagged against his brother. All the while, he kept his gaze on Riley.

"Please, don't let them do this to me! You said you were my mate. That means you're supposed to protect me. Not let the fucking cats make me their next medical project."

"It's not really him saying all those things," Daniel whispered soothingly, echoing Colin's earlier thought.

"Please, tell me I did the right thing," Colin begged.

"You had no other choice. Even though he doesn't realize it right now, you *are* protecting your mate."

As Colin watched them wheel the cot away, he repeated those words repeatedly over in his head. It still was hard because his natural instinct wanted him to rush forward and wrap Riley in a protective embrace.

The brothers watched until Riley was out of sight, although sounds of his screams and sobs continued for a few more agonizing moments.

"I need you to do something for me," Colin said, his voice breaking a bit.

"Anything – just name it."

"Find Salvador."

Daniel sucked in a breath. "Was he the one who's been picking on Riley?"

"Yes, although I'm certain he had plenty of his friends backing him up. I'd go take care of it myself, but I'm going to the infirmary to wait to hear news about Riley."

Daniel gave his shoulder a comforting pat. "Consider it done."

# Chapter Ten

Several hours later, Colin was still sitting on the uncomfortable chair in the family room at the infirmary as he waited for word on his mate. While the screaming had stopped around four, the heavy silence was just as stressful since it only served as a mocking reminder that Colin had no clue as to Riley's condition.

When Daniel came up and sat down heavily in the chair next to him, Colin noted his brothers' shirt was streaked with blood and the back of his knuckles sported more than a few cuts. He cocked a brow, "Did we have a little excitement?"

"Yeah, I took care of Salvador and his friends," Daniel replied, with a feral grin.

"What did you do to them?" Colin's only regret was that he hadn't been there to see the punishment.

"I beat them all to within an inch of their lives and then I expelled them from the cast."

"Damn," Colin let out a low whistle. "You

weren't messing around."

"Riley's family now. I wouldn't have done anything different if you'd been the victim."

Colin swallowed against the lump in his throat. "Thank you—for defending his honor."

"I also held a cast meeting and discussed Riley's condition with them. Since we're not for sure what the exact diagnosis is, I just glossed over some parts. But they still know that the kid couldn't help some of the things he's done."

"How'd they take it?"

"They all seemed to understand. Although, I'm sure some of them felt a pretty heavy dose of guilt, too. There is no way the whole cast could have been ignorant to Salvador's actions. I sense there will be some groveling coming Riley's way."

Jacyn came through the door of the waiting room. Colin's heart hammered in his chest as the medic took a chair opposite of them and rubbed a hand over his face.

"How is he?" Colin asked.

"We have him medicated enough to get some rest. He calmed down a lot and is now even having a civil conversation."

"What's wrong with him?"

Jacyn ran his hand over his face again as he sighed. "The closest diagnosis we've been able to come up with is bipolar disorder."

"I thought that was only a human condition,"

Daniel said.

"I did, too, but since we know dick about Eagles, it could very well be common amongst their breed. I wouldn't be surprised, especially after learning about his family history."

"Can it be treated?" Colin asked.

"Normally, yes. With proper medication, patients can lead a very productive life. The problem is that Riley's shifter body is rejecting the meds. So, while the meds keep him calm, they also make him sick to his stomach."

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Daniel offered.

"Doc called a colleague of his. Supposedly the guy has treated a few Eagles before they became extinct. He's coming to see if he can do anything for Riley."

"How long until he gets here?" Colin demanded.

"A couple more hours, tops."

"Can I see Riley?"

Jacyn nodded and Colin didn't hesitate another second. He sprang to his feet and raced inside. When he spotted Riley, looking so small and pale in the center of the hospital bed, a sound of distress slipped past Colin's lips.

Riley turned his head and blinked blearily at Colin.

"Do you hate me?" Riley asked, his voice

trembling.

"Of course, I don't."

Colin rushed over to the bedside and pressed a kiss to Riley's clammy brow.

"How about you? Do you hate me?" Colin dared to ask.

Riley's bottom lip quivered as he shook his head. "I still love you. I'm just afraid that you're not going to want me anymore."

"What would make you think something like that?"

A single tear slipped down Riley's cheek. "Because I'm defective."

"You're my heart. I could never not want you."

When Colin leaned in to snag a kiss, Riley pulled back. "You don't want to do that. I've been puking, so I probably have massive gorilla breath."

To hear that tinge of smartass in Riley's answer gave Colin a flare of hope. He gave a small chuckle as he stole the kiss anyway. Riley wrinkled his nose. "Okay, that was ten different kinds of gross."

They both laughed until Riley reached up to touch Colin, only to have his hand brought up short because of the restraints. When Riley gave a sound of frustration, Colin soothed, "How about I ask them if I can untie you so I can take you to the shower? You must be dying to get cleaned up."

Riley eagerly nodded his consent, so Colin quickly got permission.

By the time he had Riley showered and in some clean clothes, the new doctor arrived. A younger looking male with short dark hair and blue eyes, Colin instantly sensed the man was a Fox shifter.

"Just make sure you don't pants this one," he whispered into Riley's ear.

The Fox studied Riley's file for several moments, before he looked up with a smile, "So are we ready to kick this thing in the ass?"

"You can make me better?" Riley ventured.

"No, you'll always have this disease, but I can help you control it. It'll take a while and be a lot of hard work, but I promise you a much better outlook on life."

Hope soared through Colin as he realized his mate was going to be better, after all.

Riley beamed up at Colin. "So what do you say?"

"I say let's beat this thing."

Two months later, Riley sat at Trevor's kitchen table. Kevin and Jared, a pair of mated Panther shifters, were with them and they were all shelling peas. Not that Riley planned on eating them because peas were...well, gross. He did find a certain amount of comfort in shelling, though, so he didn't mind the task.

"So when are you and Colin leaving for your honeymoon?" Kevin asked.

Riley glanced up at the clock. "Any minute now. He's picking me up as soon as he gets off duty."

"Are you sure it's wise to go to the ocean? We all know your history with water," Trevor ventured.

"Yeah, thanks to the meds, I'm doing much better with that kind of thing. I still have some rough days, but Colin is always there to help me through it."

"How are all the other Hawks treating you?" Kevin asked.

"They've really gone out of their way to be super nice to me."

"They should be groveling at your feet, asking for forgiveness," Kevin grumbled.

The rest of the table groaned, already knowing where the conversation was headed. Several months ago, Kevin had said some inconsiderate words about how Trevor was a slut and thus unworthy of Shane. Eventually the Panther realized what an ass he'd been and ever since, he'd been trying to make it up. A situation that Riley knew both amused and annoyed Trevor in equal parts since he'd told the Panther on numerous occasions that he'd forgiven him.

Sure enough the next words out of Kevin's

mouth were, "When I hurt Trevor, I made sure I was man enough to admit my mistake. I even got down on my knees and begged him to forgive me. If you want, I would be happy to go to over and teach the cast a proper lesson on groveling. Trust me, I'm a pro at it now."

He tried to go on, but his words were lost in a hail of peas as the rest of the group peppered him into silence. They were still laughing when a honk sounded.

Riley sprang to his feet. "That's Colin, gotta go. Kevin, make sure to keep a thorough record of all your groveling, so I can catch up when I get back."

"What sights are you guys planning on seeing?" Trevor asked.

"Sex in the hotel room. Sex on the balcony. Sex on the beach," he called back.

"On the beach?"

"Yup, eat your heart out Olivia Newton John."

"Don't you mean Deborah Kerr?"

"Not in my world," Riley replied in a singsong voice.

He then went outside to greet his mate and his future.

\* \* \* \*

The unknown shifter watched from his hiding place in the bushes as the blond Eagle rushed up and planted a passionate kiss on his mate's lips. The action was completely wanton, the Eagle even rubbing against the bigger Hawk a few times.

Disgust filled the shifter, but so did a sense of despair. All his life, he'd known he was missing half of himself and now he had located his brother, only to find him whoring himself out to a Hawk. Now the happy reunion he'd always wished for would never be happening.

The shifter's lips formed a single soundless word, *Riley*.

His foster sister and brother came up and joined him in his hiding place.

"Xavier, if you don't watch it, you're going to get us all caught," Dulla hissed, her pale fingers twisting her glossy black ponytail nervously.

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to see him. If only for one time."

"Well, now you have. Let's get out of here. The Hawks and felines hate our kind."

After shooting Riley one more longing look, Xavier nodded his agreement. Dulla had a point, after all. If the Hawks and felines hated anything more, it was the Ravens. Even those who were adopted instead of made.

#### 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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