



THE CAT'S
MEOW

ASSASSIN'S PRIDE, BOOK ONE

STORMY GLENN

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to everyone who understands what a

"Cat's Meow" is.

May we all purr our little hearts out.

CHAPTER 1

"Drive!" the dark haired man growled as he jumped into Noah's car. Noah stared. He didn't know this man. He'd *like* to know this man. He smelled wonderful. But Noah didn't know this man.

"Excuse me?"

"Are you fucking deaf?" the man shouted as he pounded on the dashboard. He kept looking over his shoulder to the rear window as if he were searching for something. "I said drive."

Noah blinked in confusion, still staring. "Do I know you?" He had to ask. It wasn't like his memory of people was that good. He forgot he met people all the time. Maybe he did know this guy and he just forgot. It wouldn't be the first time.

"Drive, damn it."

"Where to?" Noah asked curiously, still feeling a little bewildered as to why some stranger was sitting in his car. Things like this just didn't happen to him. They happened to other people. They happened on TV. They happened in the books Noah read. They didn't happen to him.

"I don't care, just drive."

Noah blinked again before turning to put the car into drive. He'd started to leave the parking spot he was in when he noticed the man wasn't wearing his seatbelt. Noah pressed on the brake and turned back to the man.

"Could you put your seatbelt on please?"

"What?"

The man looked shocked by Noah's words, his dark eyebrows shooting up nearly to his hairline, and Noah didn't understand that. It seemed like a perfectly reasonable request to him. It was illegal to ride in a car without a seatbelt. Everyone knew that. Besides, it was dangerous.

"Please put on your seatbelt."

"You're not serious."

"I wouldn't have said it if I wasn't serious," Noah explained carefully in case the man didn't understand his words. Maybe he didn't understand English? "It's illegal to ride in a vehicle without a seatbelt on. It's state law and I do not want a ticket."

The man gave Noah a peculiar look then reached back and grabbed his seatbelt, pulling it around his body and clicking it into place. "Happy?" he asked, one eyebrow cocked.

"Yes, thank you." Noah started driving again, checking the speedometer to insure he was driving the

proper speed limit, then looked both ways to see if there was any oncoming traffic. "Where can I drive you, Mr... uh..."

"Tynan, Gage Tynan."

Noah nodded. "It's very nice to meet you, Mr. Tynan. My name is Noah Andrews."

"Uh, yeah, it's nice to meet you too but call me Gage."

Noah glanced over at the man, curious as to why he seemed so puzzled by being introduced. It was polite to introduce yourself when you met someone for the first time. Noah's mother taught him that.

"Where can I take you, Gage?"

"Can you drive any faster?"

"Of course not," Noah said, shaking his head. He wanted to laugh at the silly man but even he knew that wouldn't have been polite. "The speed limit is only thirty-five here. It is a business district, after all."

"Are you daft?"

"Daft?" Noah glanced over just in time to see Gage roll his eyes. Noah's eyebrows drew together as he frowned, looking back out the front window. He got the distinct feeling that Gage was making fun of him. He got that feeling a lot.

Maybe that was one of the reasons he didn't like being around a lot of people. They always seemed to think he was odd or weird, or whatever else they wanted to call him. Noah didn't fit in.

"I am not daft, Mr. Tynan," Noah said after taking a deep controlled breath. It wouldn't do to let Gage know how much his words rankled. "I would be happy to take you wherever you want to go but you need to give me a destination."

Gage sighed deeply. "Just drop me off a few blocks from here."

There was a small part of Noah that was disappointed, but he understood. Most people didn't want to stick around him after spending any amount of time in his company. Noah was used to it.

Still, there was something compelling about the strange man that drew Noah to him. Maybe that alone was reason enough for Noah to drop Gage off at the first opportunity. He didn't need to get involved with anyone.

Noah hummed softly to himself as he drove a few blocks then pulled over into a small minimart parking lot and put the car into park. He rested his hands on the steering wheel as he turned to look at Gage.

"Will this do, Mr. Tynan?"

Gage looked around then nodded as he reached for the door handle. "Yeah, this will do fine. Thanks for the lift."

"You're very welcome." Noah barely got the words out before Gage was out of the car, slamming the door behind him. Noah watched Gage walk away. He felt a well of disappointment again as Gage disappeared into the night.

It took all of his well honed control not to call Gage back and offer to take the man wherever he wanted to go, and maybe offer to go with him. Noah was lonely, and Gage was the first person in a long time that he felt drawn to.

Noah just knew the futility of wanting something he couldn't have. It was better if he just went home and forgot all about Gage Tynan. Nothing good could come of their association. Experience had taught Noah that.

With that thought in mind, Noah put his car into drive and pulled back out into traffic to head home. He had a pile of work waiting for him, and more than likely, a hungry cat. And Precious did very bad things when she was hungry.

The front windows of Noah's apartment looked more than a little lonely when he pulled up in front of his building. He could see a single light burning and knew no

one waited inside to welcome him home. He'd turned that light on before he left earlier in the day.

He always turned a light on before he went anywhere. Not only did it make him feel just a little bit better knowing it was on, but it was less dangerous. A lot of accidents happened in the home from lack of light. Besides, he could accidentally step on Precious.

Noah's steps were slow as he carried his groceries and leather briefcase up the stairs to his second floor apartment. Unfortunately, there was no elevator in his building, and days like this made the climb seem even longer.

Precious was waiting for Noah as he opened the two deadbolt locks on his door. She meowed and wrapped herself around Noah's leg, her tail moving up his pants leg. Noah quickly locked the door again and turned to take his groceries into the small kitchen.

"Hello, Precious, I brought you something wonderful from work. Sarah had a turkey sandwich she didn't want, and she said I could bring it home for you. Wasn't that nice of her?"

Precious meowed again and raced over to her pink food dish. Noah smiled as he started pulling the groceries out of the cloth grocery sacks and carefully set them all in a

row on the counter.

"Now, you know you have to wait until I get all of the groceries put away, Precious. I might forget something and then where would we be, huh?"

Noah pulled open a kitchen drawer and pulled out his label gun. He checked to make sure there was a fresh roll of label tape then clicked today's date into place. One by one, he affixed each box, can, and container with a label.

After putting the label gun back in its place, he pulled his list out of his pocket and set it on the counter before grabbing a pencil. He never used a pen. They were too dangerous, and permanent. One by one, as he put the groceries away, he crossed them out on his list.

Once he was all done, Noah folded the cloth sack and placed it back in its place beside the refrigerator. He put the list in the *bought* box on the shelf beside the trash can and placed a new one on the fridge for the next shopping trip.

Precious meowed again, reminding Noah about the turkey sandwich he'd brought home with him. He walked over to his briefcase and pulled a small brown sack out, wrinkling his nose at Sarah's use of paper to bring her lunch to work. Didn't she know that paper sacks meant fewer

trees? She should use one of those thermal reusable lunch bags.

Noah had read it in a book.

Shaking his head, he opened the sandwich and pulled out several slices of the turkey. He carefully cut them into small bits Precious could swallow easily then dropped them into her food dish.

Noah put the sandwich back together and cut it in half. He wrapped one half and put it in the refrigerator then placed the other on a white plate. Noah grabbed a glass of milk and his plate and carried both to the small table.

Before he could forget, Noah went back to the kitchen and cleaned up his mess, washing the knife and wiping down the counter. He even folded the paper sack and placed it in the pantry closet along with the others he'd collected and hoped to return to the store.

The local grocery store paid five cents for paper sacks that could be reused. Noah knew it wasn't a lot of money sack by sack, but if he added up what he could save over a year, Noah might be able to buy Precious a new pillow bed.

Precious would like that.

Noah walked back over to the table and sat down. He grabbed a cloth napkin and folded it in his lap then

grabbed his sandwich and took a bite. Noah grimaced as he chewed. Sarah didn't use real mayonnaise. Still, it was a free sandwich and beggars couldn't be choosers.

Noah ate the sandwich.

Once his food was gone, Noah drank his milk then wiped his mouth clean. He picked up his dishes and carried them to the kitchen to clean and put away. The napkin went into his dirty clothes hamper along with the clothes he'd worn that day.

Noah was getting ready for a shower when he heard a knock on his door. He frowned then pulled his pants back up his legs. He quickly pulled his shirt back over his head and walked to the door when the knocking became more persistent.

"Who is it?" Noah asked.

"Gage Tynan."

Noah blinked. "Who?"

"We met earlier tonight?" the voice said. "You gave me a ride."

Noah shook his head at the quickening of his heart rate as he briefly entertained the idea that Gage Tynan might be here to see him. He was dreaming, and he knew it. No one that looked like this man would ever come to see him.

"How can I help you, Mr. Tynan? Do you need another ride?" Noah couldn't figure out for the life of him why Gage Tynan would be knocking on his door. Maybe the man had dropped something in his car.

That had to be it.

"Did you leave something in my car?"

"Please open the door, Noah. I hate talking through it."

That sounded like a reasonable request to Noah. Most people liked looking other people in the face when they talked. He placed the chain on the door then opened it a crack so that he could see the man's face.

"How can I help you, Mr. Tynan?"

"Can I come in?"

Noah frowned. He guessed that was a reasonable request as well, but something held him back, some little niggles of warning that slowly crawled up his spine. Noah shivered as he remembered his mother's saying about someone walking over his grave when he felt like this. It was an odd saying but so was his mother.

Noah watched the handsome man through the crack in the doorway for several moments. Finally, he closed the door and unchained it before opening it again.

"Please come in, Mr. Tynan."

Noah stood back and watched the man walk in, not realizing until he passed how large he actually was. Gage Tynan fairly filled up the doorway both with his height and his width. He even had to duck his head a little to fit through the doorframe.

Noah closed the door and turned to face the man, awed by his size and wondering why the big man was standing in his apartment. It just didn't make sense. "Did you leave something in my car, Mr. Tynan?"

"Lock the door, Noah."

Noah quickly turned to lock the door then slowly turned back, bewildered as to why he had reacted so quickly to the spoken command. He didn't even know this man, and he had no idea why he moved so quickly to do as Gage said.

"You're very... tidy, aren't you, Noah?" Gage said as he looked around the small apartment. He made it sound like he found something lacking in the way Noah organized his home.

Noah looked around as well, trying to see what Gage might see. Everything seemed to be in its place. No dishes were left out on the counter or in the sink. His collection of books was neatly organized and alphabetized by author. Even his mother's small collection of porcelain

birds was neatly dusted and arranged just so on the bookshelf. Nothing was out of place.

"Tidiness is not a bad thing, Mr. Tynan."

"No, I suppose not." Gage had a smile on his lips when he turned back around to face Noah, but somehow it didn't seem to reach his eyes. "Could I get a glass of water?"

"Of course." Noah hurried to the kitchen, mentally kicking himself for forgetting his manners. His mother taught him better than this. Noah wouldn't be surprised if Gage thought he was a complete idiot.

He grabbed a clean glass out of the cupboard and the filtered water out of the fridge, pouring Gage a cold glass. He put the filtered water jug back into the fridge then carried the glass back into the living room.

He found Gage perusing his book collection, pulling out a title here and there then setting it back. Noah cringed when Gage pulled one out, read the blurb on the back then stuck it back on the bookshelf in the wrong slot.

"Your water, Mr. Tynan."

"Thank you, Noah," Gage said as he turned and took the glass of water, drinking down nearly half of it in one shot.

Noah smiled and folded his hands together behind

his back, his fingers clenching together as he glanced over at the bookshelf. He was itching to put the misplaced book back in its proper place. Noah's world just went so much better when it was organized.

"What do you do, Noah?"

"I'm sorry?" Noah tore his gaze away from the bookshelf and trained it on Gage, realizing he had faded the man's presence out. He immediately started to feel guilty. Noah knew he wasn't making a very good impression. His mother would be so upset.

"I asked what you did for a living," Gage said. He waved his hand a little. "You know, work?"

"Oh." Noah felt his face flame. "I'm a copy editor for Silver Publishing."

"That sounds interesting, reading all those new books." Gage grinned, and Noah inhaled sharply when he realized the man had dimples in his cheek, big, luscious dimples. "I'll bet you're very good at it."

"I'm okay." Noah figured he must be okay at his job. He still had it. He knew he wasn't the best, but he also wasn't the worst. Besides, it wasn't like being a copy editor was Noah's life ambition or anything.

"It doesn't sound like you like it very much."

"It pays the bills." Noah shrugged. "What do you

do, Mr. Tynan?" *Besides jumping into stranger's cars?*
Noah thought. He was fascinated with the way one of
Gage's dark eyebrows arched.

"I'm a killer."

CHAPTER 2

Gage hooked his thumbs in the pockets of his black jeans and watched Noah Andrews sputter. The man was amusing and some distant part of Gage was saddened that he might have to eliminate him, but Noah was a witness, collateral damage. It had to be done.

"It's not very nice to make fun of people, Mr. Tynan. I was honest with you about my employment. It is only polite to be honest with me."

"Oh, I was being quite honest with you, Noah. I am a killer."

Gage was in no way surprised when Noah's milky green eyes widened. He expected it. What he didn't expect was the careful way that Noah looked him up and down, as if looking for something, like maybe a weapon.

"Are you here to kill me?"

Well, that was right to the point.

"It's possible."

Noah's forehead wrinkled as he frowned. "Because I've seen your face?"

"Yes," Gage replied, although he was shocked at Noah's quick conclusion. Still, he didn't let any of his surprise show on his face. He just regarded Noah silently as

the man twisted his hands together in front of him.

"Will you take my cat?"

Gage's jaw nearly dropped as he stared at Noah in shock. "I'm here to kill you and you want to know if I will take your cat?"

"Precious gets very upset if she's left alone for too long. She might make a mess." Noah hurried across the room to the corner, bending over to pick up the biggest long-haired mongrel cat Gage had ever seen. This was Precious? She looked like she could eat an entire side of beef all by herself and still be hungry.

"She's a very good girl," Noah continued as he carried the huge cat back over to Gage. "I have food for her and everything. I could pack it for you along with her bed and blankets, her toys. It wouldn't take long, I promise."

"Noah, I'm here to kill you," Gage said slowly just in case Noah didn't understand. "I am not here to make friends with your cat."

"But..."

"Noah!"

Gage couldn't believe he was having this conversation with a potential target. The guys back at the agency would be laughing their asses off if they could see him right now.

"Okay, I understand." Gage frowned when Noah's voice wobbled a bit. "I imagine you have to travel a lot for your work and don't really have time for a cat. If I packed her stuff, would you take her downstairs to Mrs. Turner? You could just leave her in front of Mrs. Turner's door. Precious has a cat carrier even though she doesn't like to use it."

"Noah, I am not doing anything with your cat."

"But, it could be days before someone discovers my body." Noah clutched the cat to his chest until she let out a protesting yowl. "Precious could starve to death."

Gage rolled his eyes. "Fine, if it will make you feel better, I'll make sure that Precious is taken care of." Anything to get the man to stop going on about his damn cat.

"Promise?"

Killers didn't make promises.

"Yes."

"Thank you," Noah whispered. "I'll just get her stuff together."

Gage folded his arms across his chest and watched Noah set the cat on the floor then hurry around his apartment gathering items and placing them on the coffee table. The entire time, he wondered what in the hell he was

doing. He had to be out of his mind.

Gage was a trained killer, an assassin. He had a reputation for being as cold as stone. He never missed his mark, and he never left a witness. So why was he letting this little copy editor get to him?

"Okay, I'm done," Noah said as he set a bag on the floor at Gage's feet. He held a piece of paper out to Gage. "This is her feeding schedule and her likes and dislikes. She won't eat anything with beef in it. I think she's allergic or something."

"Uh huh."

Noah picked Precious back up in his arms and gave her a long hug as he carried her toward the closet. Gage tensed when Noah opened the closet, worried that the man might be going after a weapon until he saw him pull out a tan-colored cat carrier.

Noah was talking to the cat, but his voice was so low that Gage couldn't quite make out the words. When the man turned, he had tears in his eyes. Noah gave one last hug to his cat then put her in the cat carrier. He picked it up and carried it over to set it down beside the bag of cat stuff.

"Okay, what should I do now?" Noah asked, his voice sounding low and shaky. "How is this done? Are you going to shoot me or stab me or something else? What

would be easiest for you?"

Gage blinked. This conversation just couldn't be real. No one politely asked a killer how they were going to be killed then tried to make it easier for the killer. Noah should be running screaming from the apartment. He hadn't made a single move toward the door.

"Noah, what do you think is going to happen here?"

Noah's golden eyebrows furrowed. "You're going to kill me then take Precious downstairs to Mrs. Turner."

"You do understand that when I kill you, I will really kill you. You will no longer be alive. No breathing. No coming back to life. The paramedics won't even be able to revive you. You'll be dead."

Gage expected Noah to be shocked, to run from the room in fear. He didn't expect the little man to nod. "Yes, I understand perfectly. You explained it very well to me."

"And you're not scared?"

"Of course I'm scared. I don't want to die." Noah didn't sound scared. He sounded like he was having an everyday conversation, not one where he was discussing his death. "Will it hurt?"

"Will what hurt?"

"When you kill me, will it hurt?"

"I will make it quick. You won't feel a thing."

"Okay, okay, that's good. I don't much like pain."

Noah pressed his lips together for a moment, looking pensive. "Would I have time to take a shower first? You interrupted me before I could take my nightly shower, and I would hate for anyone to find me when I was dirty."

"Noah!"

"I promise to be quick, and you can search the shower first. I don't have any weapons in there, I promise."

Noah's forehead wrinkled as if he were in deep thought.

"You really never should have weapons in the shower. You could slip and fall."

Noah Andrews was unbelievable. He wanted to take a shower before Gage killed him? What would he care if he was dirty once he was dead? What would anyone care? Noah's body would most likely be in a pool of blood. No one would notice if he'd showered first.

Gage opened his mouth to tell Noah exactly that when he saw a tear well up in the man's milky green eyes. He just didn't understand the sudden gentleness he felt for the strange man. It didn't make sense, but Gage couldn't prevent himself from agreeing.

"Fine, you can take a shower first."

"Thank you, Mr. Tynan, that is very kind of you."

Kind?

Gage must be losing his touch. He shook his head as he followed Noah into the bathroom, half in amusement at the man's eager quickness and half in disbelief at himself. He couldn't believe he was agreeing to this.

Gage quickly searched the bathroom then the shower stall, grabbing the razors off the shower shelf before standing back and leaning against the door. When Noah looked at him and just stood there, Gage arched an eyebrow at him.

"I'm not leaving."

"Oh." Noah's lower lip slipped into his mouth as he seemed to bite down on it. "Could you turn around then?"

"You want me to turn around?"

"I have to get undressed and..." Noah's face flushed as his eyes darted away from Gage's. "I've never... I mean, no one has ever... please?"

Gage rolled his eyes and turned away from Noah, instantly spotting the man in the bathroom mirror. He wondered if Noah had forgotten that the mirror was there when he started to take his clothes off.

Gage swallowed hard when he got a clear look at Noah's naked body as the man undressed. He had a thing for twinks, and that was exactly what Noah was, from the top of his white blond hair to the bottom of his small

delicate feet. Gage's next kill was exactly the type of man he would have fucked into the wall given half a chance.

And didn't that just suck?

"Noah, have you ever been fucked before?" he asked when he remembered Noah's stammered words. Gage chuckled when Noah jumped and wide green eyes blinked up at him. The bright red that suffused Noah's face was enough of an answer to make Gage's cock throb in his jeans.

Gage turned around and grinned at Noah. "Would you like to?"

"Would I like to what?"

"Would you like to be fucked?" Gage asked.

Noah's entire body seemed to shudder. "By you?" he whispered.

"By me."

"I... uh... yes?"

That was good enough for Gage. He pulled his jacket off and laid it on the counter then reached for the shoulder holster and gun and pulled it off. He laid it down on the jacket and pointed to it. "Don't touch."

Noah shook his head slowly because speech seemed to be beyond him. His mouth was hanging open, and his wide eyes dominated his face. Gage couldn't tell if Noah's

astonishment was more arousing or not, but the cock coming to life between Noah's legs sure was.

Gage knew he had to be nuts to even consider having sex with someone he was about to kill, but he just could not pass up a man that looked like Noah. Besides, killing the man before he'd ever been laid just went against Gage's moral code. Everyone should have sex at least once in their life.

"Get into the shower, Noah, and turn it on. I don't like cold water."

Noah nearly tripped over the edge of the shower as he stepped backward into it and reached for the faucet handle. He didn't seem to be able to take his eyes off of Gage. He watched every movement Gage made, more so now than he had when Gage announced he was a killer.

Gage folded the last of his clothes and laid them on the counter then stepped toward Noah, pushing him back into the shower and crowding his body. It was a damn small shower, but that also meant they had to stand close together.

Gage was all for that.

Gage wrapped his hand around the back of Noah's neck, grabbing a large handful of hair and pulling the man's head back until it tilted up to his. Noah looked eager, his

lips pursing as if asking for a kiss.

Gage didn't kiss.

Instead, he leaned down and latched onto Noah's neck with his lips. Gage was careful not to suck up any skin, but he did nibble until he felt Noah shudder in his arms, a long low groan falling from the man's lips.

He stroked his other hand down Noah's back, feeling each bone of his spine as he went, until he reached the soft curve leading to Noah's buttocks. The small curve intrigued Gage enough to stroke his hand there for several moments as he continued to nibble on Noah's neck.

He started making small circles with his hand, growing bigger and bigger with each swipe until his fingers grazed the top of the cleft between Noah's butt cheeks. Noah whimpered and pressed himself against Gage.

Gage grinned and pressed his finger over the cleft then slowly pushed down between the two generously rounded cheeks. Noah's entire body vibrated when Gage's finger brushed over his hole, the man standing on his tiptoes.

"Please," Noah begged, which just added to the delight Gage took in the man's body. Not only did he like small delicate men, he liked small delicate submissive men. This time it was Gage who shuddered.

"I don't suppose you have any lube, do you?" Gage asked as he tilted his head back to look down into Noah's face.

"Lube?"

"Lube, slick, something to make things easier on you when I fuck you?"

When Noah just stared up at him, looking confused and dazed, Gage decided to take things into his own hands, so to speak. He looked around the shower until his eyes settled on a bottle of body wash. He popped the lid and poured some on his fingers before putting the bottle back on the little shelf.

Reaching down behind Noah, Gage pushed his lubed fingers back between the man's ass cheeks. A soft gasp fell from Noah's lips when Gage pressed his finger against the man's tight hole. Gage grinned and stroked the small bit of puckered flesh for several moments before he felt it loosen up enough to push one finger inside.

Damn, he liked them like this. Noah was tight, eager, and begging to be filled. And Gage was just the man to do it. He thrust his finger into Noah's ass then slowly pulled it out before thrusting it in again.

Noah fairly came apart in his arms when he added a second finger. The man's body trembled. Small moans fell

from his lips. His skin was flushed with desire. Well, at least Gage hoped it was desire. If the hard cock leaking against his leg was anything to go by, Noah was in heaven.

"Do you like that, baby?"

Noah nodded vigorously.

"Do you want another one?" Gage asked as he thrust his two fingers in and out of Noah's ass. The man had a tight grip on Gage's fingers, almost as if he didn't want to let them go. Gage had a harder time pulling them out than he did pushing them in.

When Gage pressed a third finger into the group and thrust them into Noah's snug opening, Noah's entire body went taut. Noah cried out as hot liquid splashed against Gage's leg.

Gage looked down at Noah, shocked the man had come from so little stimulation. Gage hadn't even touched Noah's cock. He guessed he shouldn't be too surprised. Noah was a virgin. Didn't mean he wasn't going to fuck him, though.

Gage pulled his fingers from Noah's ass and grabbed for the bottle of impromptu lube again. He poured some more into the palm of his hand and set the bottle back on the shelf. Reaching between him and Noah, Gage rubbed the body wash over his cock until he was nice and

slick.

"Legs around my waist, Noah," Gage said as he easily lifted the man up by his butt. Noah's legs immediately wrapped around his waist. Gage grunted as Noah's legs tightened around him in a vise grip. Despite all appearances to the contrary, Noah was a strong little twink.

Gage stepped forward and pushed Noah up against the shower stall wall. He lifted the man enough to wiggle his cock into place at the entrance to the man's tight ass then slowly lowered Noah's body until he felt himself bottom out.

Looking at Noah, Gage wondered if the man was even breathing. His eyes were as big as saucers, and his mouth hung open as small pants fell from his lips. Noah looked dazed, but Gage could see no signs of pain in his face.

"Are you ready, baby?"

Noah nodded, but he didn't stop panting. Gage didn't know if Noah even knew what was about to take place. He had no clue how much experience the man might have beyond being a virgin. But Noah was about to find out.

Gage pulled his hips back, feeling his cock slowly withdraw from the tight grip Noah's body had on him then

thrust forward. Noah's eyes widened, and his panting increased. Gage could feel the man's cock start to harden again as it pressed between them.

Hooking his arms under Noah's legs, he let the man slide down the wall just a bit then started pounding into him with no warning. Noah's hand dug into Gage's shoulders. Gage knew he'd have fingernail marks in the morning. He didn't care. The hot silk enveloping his cock every time he moved seemed so much more important right at the moment.

Noah's body seemed to meet Gage's every thrust, almost as if it welcomed him in. The harder he thrust, the deeper he could go and the tighter the grip around his cock. Gage couldn't remember ever feeling anything like it.

Soft mewling noises started coming from Noah. The sound, unlike a moan or groan that Gage would have expected, seemed to spur him on. Every time Noah mewled, Gage felt the need to be deep inside the man, as if he would miss something if he wasn't.

Gage gripped Noah's hips and held them stationary as he thrust harder, pounding his cock into Noah's virgin hole. His whole world narrowed down to the body pressed between him and the wall.

He didn't even protest when Noah leaned forward

and started licking his neck, even if Noah's tongue felt kind of rough, like sandpaper, even if the man nipped at him. Each caress just seemed to arouse Gage more.

"Fuck, Noah, you were made for sex," Gage groaned as he felt his cock start to swell. His balls were rock hard against his body, and he knew he was only seconds away from spilling his load.

Despite every rule he'd ever been taught about leaving no evidence behind while on a mission, Gage couldn't prevent himself from turning his head and biting into the soft skin of Noah's neck as his orgasm exploded over him.

He thrust once, twice, then three times, the last time shoving his cock as far into Noah's ass as he could go. A long shudder shook Gage's body as he felt the head of his cock throb and expand, seed spurting from him to fill Noah.

He distantly heard Noah cry out, and the space between them filled with hot liquid. Noah's inner muscles gripped Gage's cock in a vise grip, dragging his orgasm out for so long that Gage tasted blood in his mouth before he realized he had broken the man's skin with his enthusiasm.

Gage panted heavily as his orgasm slowly started to subside. He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the shower wall behind Noah's head, wondering how in the

world he was going to kill the man who just gave him the best fuck of his life.

CHAPTER 3

Noah stretched, moaning when aches in his unused muscles made their presence known. He'd started to roll over onto his back when he suddenly became aware of a heavy weight around his waist, pinning him to his bed.

It was his bed, right?

Noah lifted his head and looked around the room. Yep, this was his room alright, white sheets, white comforter, and simple wooden furniture. But if this was his room, whose arm was around his waist?

Noah could feel a hard body pressed up against his backside, a very impressive hard body too. He turned his head as far as he could and caught a glimpse of dark brown hair before a noise in the other room caught his attention.

Noah suddenly remembered Precious and the cat carrier he had left her in the previous night. His heart pounded frantically, one, because he'd had sex for the very first time and all those memories were flooding his head. And two because Precious was sure to be pissed at him. Noah slowly scooted out from under Gage's arm and rolled to the side of the bed.

"Where are you going?"

Noah froze then cautiously glanced over his

shoulder to see two dark hazel eyes watching him. He pointed toward the living room. "I have to let Precious go to the litter box. She's been locked in the cat carrier all night."

Noah grew nervous under Gage's intense stare and started twisting his fingers together. He knew the man still planned to kill him. That was a given. Gage was an assassin. He didn't give up killing someone just because they'd had mind-blowing sex together.

But he still needed to let Precious go potty.

"I promise to come right back," Noah said.

"See that you do," Gage replied. "We have unfinished business."

Noah nodded and quickly turned away before Gage could see the tears that sprang to his eyes. He didn't want to appear weak to the man. He knew he was going to die, and he would meet his death head on, no matter how much he wished it could be different.

Noah grabbed his pajama bottoms off the nightstand and stood up. He quickly pulled them up his legs and headed for the bedroom door. Pausing at the door, Noah turned his head slightly, just enough to see Gage's profile.

"Can I get you anything from the kitchen?"

"No."

Noah pressed his lips together and walked out of the bedroom. He would not cry. He wouldn't! He would be brave. He'd gained more in the last few hours than he ever thought he would. If that meant his death, so be it.

"Hi, my Precious, are you mad at me?" Noah said quietly as he knelt down on the floor and released the door lock on the cat carrier. Precious immediately climbed up into Noah's lap and started purring, rubbing her head under Noah's chin.

"I didn't mean to leave you in there that long, Precious. Time just kind of got away from me. I promise it won't happen again." Noah climbed to his feet and carried the cat into the kitchen. "Mr. Tynan is going to make sure you have a good home when he's done his job. He won't let us down. Now, you go on and go potty while I make your breakfast."

Noah set Precious down on the floor and watched her walk to the pantry where her litter box was located. He grabbed a clean plate out of the cupboard and set it on the counter before opening the fridge. His eyes immediately fell on the leftover chicken takeout he had been saving. He didn't think he would need it anymore.

Grabbing the chicken, Noah brought it over to the counter and cut it up into little cat-sized chunks. He set the

plate on the floor for Precious then cleaned up the mess he had made.

After cleaning up his mess, Noah carefully folded the washcloth he had used to clean the counter and set it beside the sink. His stomach was too upset to eat, and Gage didn't want anything. There was nothing preventing Noah from returning to the bedroom, and his death.

When he started to step out of the kitchen, Noah almost tripped as Precious wrapped herself around his ankle. Noah steadied himself then leaned down to pet the cat, eventually kneeling on the floor to get closer to her.

"You'll have a good life, Precious, I promise. Mr. Tynan is going to take real good care of you."

Noah sucked in his bottom lip and bit down on it to keep himself from crying out as grief overwhelmed him. He *really* didn't want to die. He wanted Gage to fuck him in the shower again. Noah had never felt anything like it in his life.

He didn't suppose he ever would again, either.

"Noah!"

Noah jumped when he heard Gage yell from the bedroom. He kissed Precious on the head then set her on the floor. "Well, I guess this is it, huh?"

Precious mewed as she rubbed her body against

Noah's. Noah smiled and patted her on the head before climbing to his feet. Each step he took toward the bedroom sapped all of his strength and courage. Noah wondered if this was how prisoners felt walking to the guillotine.

Noah paused at the door and took a deep breath before pushing it open. He was surprised to find Gage still in bed, still naked. He would have expected the man to be dressed and ready to take his life.

"I'm sorry I took so long. I was feeding Precious." Noah realized he was babbling but he couldn't help himself. He was so nervous and apprehensive he felt like he might throw up at any moment. "She gets cranky when she doesn't stay on her schedule, and you don't want to see Precious when she's cranky. The last time I was late getting her dinner to her she shredded one of my pillows."

"Noah," Gage said softly.

"I don't suppose I could talk you into another shower?" Gage just arched an eyebrow. Noah nodded. "Yes, I suppose that is asking too much. I know you've already given me more than enough time. I just—" Noah waved his hand absently, not knowing what else to say.

Maybe there wasn't anything else to say. It wasn't Gage's fault that Noah was terrified. Noah had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and Gage was simply doing

his job. Noah didn't have the right to take his grief out on him.

Noah pressed his lips together and pushed his pajama bottoms down his legs. His hands trembled as he carefully folded them and set them back on the nightstand. Walking over to his dresser, Noah pulled out a clean pair of underwear then pulled them on. He didn't want to be found naked, but he also didn't want to get his clothes messy.

Someone could donate them or something.

Noah crossed back over to the bed and climbed on. He moved over until he was next to Gage then rolled onto his back. Noah clenched his fists at his side and drew in another deep breath then exhaled before meeting Gage's curious gaze.

"Would it be better if I closed my eyes?"

"Better?"

"Would you prefer my eyes open or closed?"

"Uh, either?"

Noah didn't understand the confusion he could see on Gage's face. Maybe no one had ever asked before? Noah decided to close his eyes. He didn't want to see the death blow coming.

"Okay, I'm ready," Noah whispered. Then he waited.

Noah almost crawled out of his skin when he felt the bed dip. He opened his eyes just a smidge and peeked through his lashes to see Gage roll out of bed and walk into the bathroom.

Noah was confused for a moment until he realized that Gage's clothes were in the bathroom, and his gun. Noah hadn't thought about what Gage would use to kill him. He'd been too caught up in the actual killing part of things.

And then the mind-blowing sex.

Noah quickly closed his eyes when he saw Gage come out of the bathroom. He really didn't want to see it coming. He'd much rather be oblivious as to when he was going to die, kind of like dying in a car accident.

The bed dipped again, and Noah held his breath. He heard rustling and then everything went silent. When nothing happened after several moments, Noah couldn't stand it anymore. He opened his eyes and looked over at Gage, surprised to find the man just staring down at him.

"Is there a problem?"

"We forgot to use a condom last night, and I can't find any in your drawer."

"That's because I don't have any."

"Why on earth wouldn't you have any condoms?"

Don't you know you can catch something that way? If you have anything, I've already got it, but that doesn't mean I want to press the issue."

"I was a virgin, remember? Not only do I not have anything, but I have no need of condoms."

"Were you planning on being a virgin your entire life?"

"No, I figured I might meet someone someday, and if that happened, then I would buy condoms."

"Are you even gay?"

"Gay?"

"Do you like men?"

Noah felt his face redden as he lowered his eyes.

"Yes."

"Well, that's a relief," Gage snorted.

Noah didn't understand why it should matter one way or the other if he liked men or women. It wasn't like he was ever going to get the opportunity to have sex with anyone except Gage.

"Could we just get this over with?" Noah asked as he closed his eyes again. The waiting was driving him crazy. It wasn't that he wanted to die but...

"Eager, are you?"

Noah's heart squeezed in his chest when Gage

chuckled. He'd thought Gage was a nice guy when the man agreed to care for his cat and let him take a shower. The sex had been a huge bonus. He hadn't realized until now that Gage had a sadistic streak in him.

"Please, just..."

"Shh, it's okay, baby, I'll take care of you."

Noah expected to feel the cold hard steel of Gage's gun against him not the man's hands. He jerked, his eyes flying open as he looked at Gage in shock. "What are you doing?" he asked when Gage's hands began to caress his chest.

"What does it feel like I am doing?"

"Touching me."

"Then you're a very observant young man because that is exactly what I am doing to you. I hope to be doing a lot more here in a minute."

"Why?"

Gage's eyebrows shot up his forehead. "Why am I touching you?"

"Yes."

"Because it's going to be damn hard to fuck you if I don't."

"You're going to fuck me again?"

"That was the plan. Did you have something else in

mind?"

"I thought you were going to kill me. Isn't that what you came here to do?" Suddenly terrified, Noah pressed himself back into his pillows when Gage leaned up on his elbow and glared down at him.

"Why do you want to die so badly?"

"I don't!"

"Every time I turn around you're waiting for me to kill you, even offering yourself up to me like a sacrificial lamb. Why aren't you trying to escape and save yourself?"

"Would it do me any good?"

"No, I'd find you wherever you went but still..."

"You're a killer, your own words. I don't see why fighting you would do me any good. I can spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder and being afraid that you will find me or I can accept my fate."

"I don't think I've ever met anyone like you in my life."

"I'm sorry." Noah lowered his eyes once again. "I've tried to make this easy for you. If you would just tell me what you want me to do—"

Noah's words trailed off when Precious came barreling into the bedroom and jumped on the bed. She raced across the blankets and hunched down next to Noah,

hissing and spitting as she looked toward the bedroom door.

Gage was up and off the bed, running into the bathroom before Noah knew something was wrong. When Gage came back, he had his jeans on and his gun in his hand. He held his finger up to his lips and walked over to the nightstand, grabbing the pajamas and handing them to Noah.

"Get dressed," Gage mouthed.

Noah nodded and pulled his pajama bottoms on as quietly as he could. Noah's heart thundered in his chest, and a cold sweat broke out on the back of his neck. He climbed back up into the middle of the bed and grabbed Precious, holding her to his chest as he watched Gage creep out of the room.

Seconds went by then quickly turned into long agonizing minutes of silence. Noah jumped when heard someone cry out followed by a loud crash. Noah dropped Precious and scrambled across the bed, climbing off and running toward the bedroom door.

He paused, peeking around the corner. Noah slapped a hand over his mouth to keep from crying out when he saw Gage scuffling with another man. A third man lay on the floor by the couch, a pool of blood by his head.

Noah's breath caught in his throat when Gage took a hard punch to the face, but that didn't seem to slow the man down. Gage just shook it off and aimed his own fist at the other man, connecting with his nose. Noah grimaced as blood splattered everywhere.

What a mess.

For a moment, Noah thought that the stranger might have the upper hand as he threw punch after punch at Gage. But then Gage seemed to take control, throwing several well aimed punches at the man's ribs and stomach area. A kick with his foot and the man went down.

Noah's eyes widened as he watched Gage grab his gun off the floor then shoot just as the man raised a gun at him. Gage tucked his gun away in the back of his jeans and started searching the man.

"You really are a killer."

"Yes, I am." Gage's hands didn't even move away from what he was doing. Noah suspected the man knew he was there the entire time. "Go get dressed, something warm. And put Precious into her cat carrier."

"Why?"

Gage glanced up. "Because you're coming with me."

Noah opened his mouth to ask Gage why he would

be going anywhere when the man arched an eyebrow at him. Noah decided agreeing to Gage's demand was the safer route to go. He'd just seen the man kill someone after all.

Noah hurried back into his bedroom and got dressed. He chose a pair of jeans, a simple cotton shirt, and his winter coat. Noah topped it off with a pair of socks and good walking boots.

He'd started to grab Precious to carry her out to the living room when he suddenly got a huge homesick feeling like he might never see his apartment again. He didn't have a lot that he valued beyond his cat, but there were a few things.

Setting Precious back on the bed, Noah went to the closet and pulled down a backpack from the top shelf. He shoved a few changes of clothing inside then a picture of his mother from his nightstand and the small family memory book she'd made him. If he wasn't coming back, these were the items he wanted with him.

Grabbing Precious as he walked by the bed, Noah headed back out to the living room. Gage was on a cell phone when he walked in, talking low and nodding every few moments.

Noah was curious to know who Gage was talking to

but not curious enough to ask. He knelt down on the floor and put Precious into her cat carrier. Getting to his feet again, he grabbed the carrier and his back pack and looked over at Gage.

"I'm ready."

Gage nodded and continued his conversation. When he was done, he shoved the phone in his pocket and headed for the bedroom. Noah stood there, not knowing what to do with two bodies on his floor and a killer in his bedroom.

If Noah ever wanted to run, this would be the time to do it. He had everything he needed in his hands. He turned to look at the front door, which strangely enough was still locked, Noah noticed. Noah had taken a step toward the door when he felt a large hand come down on his shoulder.

"Come on, let's get out of here," Gage said as he took the cat carrier. "A cleanup crew should be here in a few minutes to turn your apartment back to its pristine condition. We can't be here when they arrive."

"A cleaning crew?"

"They make little messes like this disappear."

"Are you part of a cleaning crew?" Noah asked as he hurried out the front door after Gage and down the stairs. He didn't have any other choice. The man had his

cat.

"Nope, I work strictly alone."

"But you came here to clean up your mess, didn't you?"

Gage chuckled. "Yeah, I guess you could say that."

"So, you're a one man cleaning crew then?"

"Okay."

Noah was confused about a great many things. He didn't understand why he was going somewhere with Gage. He didn't understand why there were two dead men on the floor of his apartment. And he didn't understand why he was putting his trust in a man who planned to kill him.

CHAPTER 4

Gage rolled his eyes when Noah stumbled into yet another obstacle. The man was a walking disaster area. They hadn't walked more than a few feet from Noah's front steps before the man crashed into a trash can, leaving a trail of garbage in his wake.

Two trashcans, one tree, and an old woman walking her dog later, and Gage was wondering why he'd brought Noah with him instead of leaving him back in the apartment for the cleaning crew. They hadn't even made it to the next block yet.

Gage was used to moving quickly and quietly. He used stealth, cunning, and the skills of his profession to perform his duties. He didn't walk face first into trees. Hell, he didn't walk face first into anything unless he wanted someone to think he was daft. Gage was beginning to wonder about Noah.

"Noah," Gage snapped quietly as he turned around to glare at the man, "pick up your feet and watch where you're going."

"I'm trying." Noah dug into his pocket and pulled out his keys, turning to point them back down the block. "I don't understand why we're walking. Wouldn't it just be

easier to take my car?"

"We're taking the subway."

Noah's face was pale white when it snapped back around to look at Gage. He started shaking his head, slowly backing up. "No, no, I can't take the subway. There's so many people and—"

"Noah, we're taking the subway." Gage tried to reach out and take Noah's hand, but the man stepped back with more swiftness than Gage would have given him credit for if he hadn't seen it with his own eyes. "Noah!"

"We really should just take my car. I even have a full tank of gas. I always make sure I have gas in my car." Noah turned and started walking toward his car. "You should never really let your gas tank get below a quarter of a tank, you know. It's bad for your engine."

Gage tilted his head to one side as he tried to figure out what planet Noah was from. He certainly hadn't been born on earth. Well, even if he had been, Gage doubted the man's feet ever touched the ground. His head was too high up in the clouds.

Maybe his behavior was due to a lack of oxygen to his brain?

The reality and danger of Noah's movements suddenly filtered through Gage's bewildered brain. He

watched in horror as Noah stretched out his arm and pointed a small black device at a car about twenty feet away.

Gage had dropped the cat carrier and run after Noah, knowing somehow that he would never reach the little man in time, when he heard a distinctive click then Noah muttered something about electronics not working when they should.

The gust of flames from the car exploding reached Noah just as Gage did. Gage grabbed Noah around the waist and tackled the man to the hard cement. He heard Noah grunt as Gage's entire weight stretched out over the top of him.

The flames were intense and licked at Gage's skin. The explosion sounded so loud the noise made Gage's eardrums throb. He could tell from the ache of pain in his back that he was covered in glass from the windshield. He wouldn't be surprised to discover he'd suffered a few burns as well.

Gage looked down at the small man pinned beneath him. Besides the shock on Noah's face, the man seemed unscathed. Gage brushed his hand over the side of Noah's pale face.

"Are you okay? Do you hurt anywhere?"

"My car exploded," Noah whispered. He held up the remote device to unlock his car doors and showed it to Gage. "I was just trying to unlock the door. I didn't mean to make it blow up."

Noah's softly spoken words alerted Gage to the danger they were in. Besides the fact that the cleaning crew should be there any moment to take care of the two dead men upstairs, someone had put a bomb in Noah's car.

Gage didn't know if the bomb had been put in Noah's car to take him out, or to eliminate Noah. He did know that they needed to get out of there fast. They were sitting ducks out in the open. Anyone could be gunning for them.

Gage winced as he climbed to his feet and reached out a hand to Noah. "Come on, baby, we need to get Precious and find a safe place to hide."

"Hide?" Noah muttered as he grabbed Gage's hand and got up. "Why would we need to— Oh my— Precious!"

Gage blinked as Noah tore away from him and raced back to where Precious sat meowing in her cat carrier. He hadn't known it was actually possible for a full grown man to croon and murmur to a cat in quite the way Noah did.

The man acted like he just discovered the crown

jewels when he opened the carrier and pulled the feline out. In a way, it was kind of endearing. Noah truly did seem to care for his cat.

In another way, it pissed Gage off. It was just a damn cat, and a fat cat at that. Maybe it was because Gage had never had a pet before, but he didn't really see what they were good for. They ate, they slept, and they pooped. According to Noah, they also shredded pillows. Why have one?

But for some reason that Gage didn't understand, holding the cat and cradling her to his chest seemed to make Noah feel better. It certainly calmed him down. Gage could even see some color coming back into Noah's face.

Gage shook his head as he reached down to pick up Noah's backpack and carry it over to the man. He set it down next to the cat carrier and squatted down beside Noah.

"Noah, we need to go."

"Go?"

"The cleaners are coming, remember?"

Noah's forehead wrinkled as he glanced beyond Gage to the burning car. "Will they be able to clean that up?"

Gage glanced back over his shoulder and took in the

destruction behind him. He slowly shook his head. "No, I don't think even the cleaning crew could clean that up."

"Will they be mad at me?"

Gage looked back at Noah. He could see the worried furrow of Noah's forehead and the way the man bit his lower lip. Gage couldn't help but smile. Noah was adorable even when he was nervous. Maybe that was the man's allure for Gage.

That, and the unabashed way the man fucked.

"We're not going to be here so the cleaners will never even know you were involved." Gage pushed himself to his feet and held out his hand once again. "Come on, Noah, put Precious back in her carrier so we can go."

Surprisingly, Noah did exactly as Gage ordered. He gave Precious a quick kiss and hug, the cat yowling in protest, then placed her inside the cat carrier. Once the door was securely locked, Noah climbed to his feet.

"Okay, I'm ready."

Gage decided not to say another word until he could get Noah out of there. He grabbed the cat carrier and handed Noah his pack. Once Noah had the pack slung over his shoulder, Gage grabbed his arm and started pulling him down the sidewalk and away from the destruction behind them.

Gage still had no idea where they were headed, just as long as it was away from Noah's apartment. He needed to figure out who was trying to kill either one or both of them and why.

The whole assignment Gage had been sent on had gone sour from the very beginning. The mark he'd been told to eliminate wasn't where the intel said he would be. Instead, Gage had been met by several armed men who were clearly expecting him.

He'd gotten off a few shots, taking some of the armed men out before having to escape out a small window that led to the parking lot where Noah had his car. Jumping into the man's vehicle seemed like the only escape at the time.

Gage had sneaked a peek at Noah's wallet before he got out, memorizing his name and address. Having Noah there right when Gage needed him seemed too coincidental. He had wanted to know where the man was so he could find him later on.

Gage waited awhile, then tracked Noah down. After observing the man's apartment for an hour, he'd gone upstairs with the intention of finding out if Noah was involved. Gage didn't know if he would have to kill Noah or not when he knocked on the door.

He still wasn't sure, although, if he were going to kill Noah, Gage couldn't figure out why he was dragging him down the street as if the hounds of hell were after them both. The logical thing would be to leave Noah for whoever was after them or the cleaners.

But he couldn't do it. Gage mentally smacked himself up side the back of his head. He should be using his brain right now. Noah was a huge liability. The man could barely function in the normal world. He would probably end up getting Gage killed.

And yet the idea of one white blond hair on Noah's head being disturbed was enough for Gage to see red. He just didn't get it. True, Noah was a hot little piece. The man was made for sex. But still, was he good enough for Gage to drag him along?

The tight grip Gage had on the man's arm said yes.

* * * *

Gage locked the motel door behind him and turned around to lean back against the door, drawing in his first relieved breath in a couple of hours. They were finally off the streets and indoors, even if it was in a motel that rented rooms by the hour.

He heard a grunt and chuckled as he saw Noah fall face first onto the only bed in the room. He'd bet nearly anything that if Noah knew how old the blankets and sheets were on the bed he wouldn't go within a mile of them.

"Tired, baby?"

Noah groaned and nodded his head, not even lifting it from the bed. Gage chuckled as he walked over to sit down on the bed next to him. He frowned a moment later as he watched himself reach out and pat Noah on the back almost as if he wanted to soothe the man.

Gage had never *soothed* anybody in his life.

He really was starting to lose it. Gage stood up and headed for the bathroom. Maybe a cold shower would make him feel better. He needed to get his head clear and decide what to do next because, right now, all he could think about was fucking Noah again.

"I'm going to take a shower," he said as he paused in the bathroom doorway. "Stay away from the windows and don't open the door for anyone."

Noah just grunted. Gage took it as the man's agreement and walked into the bathroom. As much as he wanted to shut the door and hide away from the world for a few minutes, Gage couldn't stand the idea of not being able to hear if someone tried to break in and hurt Noah.

He laid his gun on the bathroom counter and slowly stripped off his clothes. As he climbed into the shower and turned on the water, Gage tried to figure out how his life had gone so wrong in just a few hours.

He'd missed his target, and he never missed his target. And the only witness to his activity was currently laying face first on a bed in the room next door. To top it off, instead of eliminating Noah as he should have, Gage was protecting him.

And his fat cat.

He found himself doing things he never did, like letting a witness live. The whole fucking Noah and soothing him thing were actions Gage wasn't even ready to address. They were already starting to chink holes in the strong armor Gage had erected around himself years ago.

Despite who he was, the chaos that seemed to follow Noah wherever he went, and the fat cat, Gage actually like the guy. Noah was quirky. Well, truthfully, Noah was odder than a blue duck. But, strangely enough, that was what Gage liked about the man.

Noah was about as far from the normal men Gage messed around with as possible, barring his looks. He didn't have an egotistical bone in his body. Gage doubted Noah even knew how gorgeous he was.

Gage shook his head and reached over to turn off the water. He would have liked to shampoo his hair and scrub the grime off but hotel rooms by the hour didn't seem to provide those types of amenities. At least he had gotten most of the dirt off of his body.

Gage grabbed the cleanest towel he could find and started drying himself off. He knew he needed to get the little bits of glass out of his back before he got dressed. Turning his back to the mirror, Gage could see several small cuts in his back; some pieces of glass he could pull out himself, some he would need help with.

Gage did what he could, wincing each time he pulled a small piece of glass out of his back. When he couldn't reach anymore, he knew he'd have to call Noah into the bathroom. Gage hated asking for help. It made him dependent on someone else, and he didn't like having to rely on anyone, not even Noah.

"Noah, can you come in here?"

A moment later, a sleepy-eyed face appeared around the corner of the bathroom doorframe. "Yes?"

"I have some glass pieces in my back from the explosion," Gage said as he turned his back to Noah. "Can you pull them out for me?"

"Oh, you're hurt," Noah whispered.

Gage glanced over his shoulder when he heard the concern in Noah's voice. He frowned. He couldn't remember the last time he'd heard someone be concerned about him. Had he ever heard it?

Growing up in a series of foster homes hadn't made him a lot of close relationships. The best he ever hoped for was a few nights of mutual pleasure and a handshake when he went on his way. He'd never had someone care what happened to him. Gage didn't know exactly how to react to it or the gentle touch of Noah's hands on his back as the man carefully pulled each piece of glass free. Gage wasn't used to gentle touches at all, even during sex. It was always hot and animalistic like when he took Noah in the shower. It wasn't gentle.

Who did gentle?

"I think that's all of them," Noah finally said. "Do you have anything I can clean these up with? I don't want them to get infected, and while they are not very deep, I don't know what could have gotten into them since I blew up my car. And infection could be very bad."

Gage swung around to look at Noah, noting his serious face. "Noah, you didn't blow up your car."

"Oh, that's sweet of you to say but I—"

Sweet? Geez!

"Noah." Gage grabbed Noah's arms and gave him a little shake. "You didn't blow up your car. I swear."

"But..." Noah's forehead wrinkled as his eyes darted left and right before coming back to settle on Gage's face. "I clicked the button, and the car blew up. I know I did it. I didn't mean to do it, mind you. I liked that car, and I certainly wouldn't have done anything to hurt you but—"

"Noah, someone put a bomb in your car. It exploded when you activated the remote unlock button."

"But why?"

"That's something I'd like to know as well." Gage dropped his hands from Noah's arms and crossed them over his chest. He arched an eyebrow and gave Noah his sternest glare. "Something you want to tell me, Noah?"

Gage couldn't understand what Noah could have done to have someone want to blow up his car. The man was a copy editor, not a rocket scientist. He didn't have a mean bone in his body, and espionage wasn't something anyone could do if they didn't have some sort of aggressive nature.

Gage was living proof of that.

"Well?"

Noah shook his head. "No, no, I don't think there's anything I want to tell you."

"Try again."

It made sense to Gage. He hadn't put all of the pieces together yet, but he knew deep down inside that Noah was involved somehow. He was starting to think that the men back at Noah's apartment and the bomb weren't meant for him after all.

Someone was after Noah.

CHAPTER 5

Noah's heart pounded frantically in his chest. He pressed his hand against his collarbone and tried to breathe calmly as his mother taught him. It wasn't easy when he could feel Gage's eyes watching him and knew the man wanted answers. Noah didn't have any to give him.

His secrets were just that, secret. Telling Gage anything would be pointless anyway. The man was there to kill him. Noah drew in another deep breath and tried to remember that Gage held no feelings for him, and he didn't have the right to be upset with Gage over that.

Gage never promised moonlight and roses. He never promised a lifetime together. He never even promised not to kill Noah. He'd just promised to make sure that Precious was taken care of. That's all Noah could ask of the man.

It was more than Noah should hope for, even if he did still hope. Noah glanced down at his hands, unable to meet Gage's piercing gaze. "I really don't have anything to add to this conversation."

"I want to know why someone is trying to kill you, Noah, and someone is. Believe me, I'd know."

The calming air Noah had been drawing into his

lungs suddenly caught in his throat at Gage's words. Noah started shaking his head. "No, no, no one is trying to kill me. Why would anyone try to kill me? I don't know anyone."

"Noah."

Noah started backing into the bedroom, continuing to shake his head. "I'm just a copy editor. There's no reason for someone to want to kill me. I don't have much money, and I don't own anything expensive so no, you're wrong. No one is trying to kill me."

"Noah."

Noah started to get frustrated. For every step he took backward, Gage took one forward. Noah felt like he was being stalked. Gage had his arms crossed over his chest still, but both eyebrows had drawn together in a deep frown. He looked fierce.

He looked hot.

"I... um..." Noah licked his lips as his eyes traveled down Gage's body. For some reason, he only now clued in to the fact that the man was buck ass naked. Noah had no idea how he'd missed it.

Maybe he was daft?

"Noah."

Noah backed up more as Gage continued to advance

on him until he suddenly felt the bed behind him and sat down. When Gage didn't stop, Noah scrambled back on his hands and feet until he moved up toward the head of the bed.

A small yelp escaped Noah's lips when he felt a large hand wrap around his leg and pull him down to the bottom of the bed. Noah rolled over and tried to crawl back up, but before he could get to his hands and knees, a large weight landed on top of him.

"I'm not going to chase you all over this room, Noah."

Noah groaned as Gage's hot breath blew over his ear and the side of his neck. He just knew Gage felt the shudder that racked his body when the man chuckled. His shudder was quickly followed by a blush that Noah felt fill his face.

"You're going to tell me what I want, love, one way or another."

Noah was debating whether to tell Gage off over calling him *love* if he didn't mean it when he felt the man's hands start to yank his pants down. Noah stilled, holding his breath.

His pants moved past his feet, and Noah heard them hit the floor. His shirt was next. Noah didn't resist, just

allowed Gage to peel all of his clothes off. Once he was naked, Noah started to roll over, but Gage's hands pressing him into the mattress stopped him. A moment later, he felt Gage's body straddle his legs.

"Now, shall we talk about why someone is trying to kill you, Noah?"

Gage wanted to talk?

Now?

Noah whimpered and buried his face in the blankets. He could feel Gage's hard cock pressing against the crease of his ass. The man's hands slowly stroked over his buttocks and lower back.

"I'm waiting, Noah."

"There's nothing to tell."

"I don't believe you, Noah."

Noah's eyes fell closed when he felt Gage's fingers move down between his butt cheeks. He pushed his butt up into the air, wanting more contact, until he felt a small smack on his ass.

"Hey, that wasn't very nice," Noah said, lifting his head out of the blankets.

"I want answers, Noah, and I won't fuck you until you give them to me. Someone is trying to kill you, and I want to know why."

"Fine, then don't fuck me," Noah snapped, surprised at the vehemence in his own voice. He never raised his voice to anyone. "Why don't you just kill me like you planned to and leave?"

Gage's entire body pressed down on Noah. "It's not going to be that easy, love. I want answers, and you have them. Now," Noah shuddered as Gage's hands stroked down his sides, "you can tell me what I want to know or you can find out just how devious I can be. There's a reason I am considered a cold-blooded killer, Noah."

Noah pressed his lips together and shook his head. He couldn't. He had secrets, yes, but he couldn't say what they were. It was forbidden. It would mean his death, and possibly Gage's, if he said anything.

"Very well, love," Gage whispered. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

Gage began an all-out assault on Noah's senses, nibbling and kissing his body. He started at Noah's neck and worked his way down the entire length of Noah's body. When Gage reached his feet, Noah thought the man might be done. He was wrong. Gage just flipped him over onto his back and started back up the way he came.

Along with the kisses and nibbles and bites, Gage's hands stroked over Noah's tingling skin, caressing every

inch inside and out. Gage's larger body brushed against Noah's, blanketing him at some times and pushing against him at others, arousing him at all times.

Noah lasted ten minutes.

"Please?" he pleaded.

Gage had Noah's hands held over his head and wouldn't allow him to touch his own body. Noah's cock ached so much he thought he might be permanently damaged if he didn't find relief soon.

"Tell me what I want to know, love, and I'll fuck you into the mattress."

"I— I can't."

"Noah."

"Please, I can't," Noah moaned as his head whipped back and forth on the bed. The overload of sensations racing through his body made it too hard for Noah to concentrate. His brain power was melting into the mattress with each touch of Gage's hand.

"So, you do know someone is trying to kill you?"

"Yes!" Noah cried out. "No... I don't know, maybe."

"Why, love? Tell me."

Noah's breath hitched in his throat when Gage released his hands and moved to kneel between his legs.

Noah's legs were lifted up over Gage's thighs and spread wide apart.

"Oh, yes, yes, please," Noah begged when he felt the tip of Gage's cock brush his quivering hole. He tried to move down, to impale himself on the rigid shaft. He needed it so bad, and he needed it now. "Gage!"

"Tell me what I want to know, love."

"Wha-what?"

"Why is someone trying to kill you, Noah?"

"Because you took my virginity!"

"What?"

Noah moaned in protest when all stimulation to his body stopped. He opened his eyes to find Gage staring down at him in complete shock, the man's mouth nearly hanging open. Noah sighed and turned his head to stare at the dirty white wall.

"I was never supposed to... but you came, and you were going to kill me, and I thought just once I wanted to try... to feel..." Noah turned to look back up at Gage, blinking when he felt tears gather in the corners of his eyes. "I thought it would be okay because you were going to kill me, but you didn't and... and now I don't know what to do."

"Wait." Gage frowned. "Are you telling me that someone is trying to kill you because we had sex?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You don't want to know."

"Oh, believe me, I want to know."

Noah's arousal faded away as he realized that he needed to tell Gage the truth. He knew once he did that the chances of being with Gage again were less than the chances that the man would still kill him, and that was a pretty sure thing.

"Can you let me up?" Noah asked. "I'll show you."

Gage looked hesitant but did as Noah asked, rolling to the side of the bed. Noah moved to the other side and knelt down on his hands and knees. He'd seen it done before. He'd just never done it himself. It couldn't be that hard.

Noah took one last long look at Gage then closed his eyes. He imagined the form he would take, long legs, pointed ears, a tail. He knew from what his mother told him before she died that his fur would be pure white and silky soft, his eyes turning a deep emerald green.

Slowly, so much so that he nearly missed it, the air around Noah began to swirl. He felt a deep pain suddenly strike through his body as it began to contort and reshape itself. The long wail that started in his throat ended as a hiss

as the pain faded.

"Holy fucking shit!"

Noah opened his eyes cautiously, blinking rapidly at the intense colors, the most amazing of which were the deep hazel eyes staring at him in horror from across the bed. Noah opened his mouth to ask Gage if he was okay, but all that came out was a meow.

Suddenly scared, Noah stepped toward Gage only to shrink back and hiss when the man scrambled off the bed and pressed himself back against the wall. Gage held up a warning hand as if to ward Noah off.

"Stay the fuck away from me!"

Noah cocked his head to one side, confused. Gage was looking at him like... like he was an abomination. The loud yowl that filled the room made Noah shudder because he knew it came from him. It was filled with pain and sorrow and the wish that Gage had actually followed through and killed him.

Noah closed his eyes and concentrated on being human again. The pain was less this time, but Noah imagined that would fade as well over time, if he had time. Gage was edging around the room as if he was afraid Noah would pounce at any moment.

Noah waited until his eyesight cleared then grabbed

the blanket off the bed to cover his nakedness. He gripped the blanket tightly in his hands to keep Gage from seeing them tremble.

"Are you going to kill me now?" Noah whispered.

"What the fuck are you?"

Noah's heart ached at the abhorrence he could hear in Gage's voice, the fear he could see in the man's eyes. Maybe Gage wouldn't have to kill after all. Maybe he would die of a broken heart.

"Does it matter?"

Noah tried to hide his shudder by wrapping the blanket more firmly around his body. Gage was staring at him like he was some sort of freak of nature. He felt just that way at the moment.

Noah started to move to the end of the bed to grab his clothes. He wanted to get dressed and hide his body from Gage's intense stare. And he wanted his cat. But the sudden tensing of Gage's body froze him where he was.

"I won't hurt you." It distressed Noah to even have to say the words. "I just want my clothes."

"Just stay right where you are," Gage said as he backed away toward the bathroom. He pointed his finger at Noah. "Don't move from that spot."

Noah nodded, and Gage disappeared into the

bathroom. He thought about following Gage and trying to explain everything, but what would be the point? Gage thought he was a monster.

Noah stayed where he was, kneeling in the middle of the bed with a blanket wrapped around his shoulders until Gage came out of the bathroom a few minutes later. He was fully dressed. He even held his gun in his hand.

"Gage, I—" Noah said as he started to move.

"Stop right where you are!"

Noah didn't breathe. He didn't think he could. Not with Gage's gun pointed at him and the man looking like he would pull the trigger at any second.

"Look," Gage began before Noah could say another word, "I don't know what the fuck you are or what in the hell is going on here, and frankly, I don't care. This shit is too freaky for me."

Noah kept his lips pressed together as he watched Gage back up toward the door. He couldn't ask Gage to understand, not considering the circumstances. Now that he was no longer a virgin and had shifted, the others would be coming for him. They knew he was no longer as he was before.

The best thing he could do for Gage was let him go, no matter how much doing so made him feel like his heart

was being ripped out of his chest. It was just better this way. Gage would be safe.

"You just stay right there until I'm gone. The room is paid up for the night, and I'm sure you can find another place to hide come tomorrow." Gage waved the gun a little bit. "You look resourceful like that."

Noah didn't say anything as he watched Gage walk out of the room. He just waited for the door to shut. Once it did, Noah moved, climbing to the bottom of the bed to grab his clothing.

His fingers felt numb as he pulled his jeans and shirt on. They didn't seem to want to work right when he pulled on his socks and tried to tie his shoelaces. He had to take several deep breaths before he was able to get the job done.

Noah couldn't seem to process what had just happened beyond the fact that Gage had left him. He should have expected it. Some things were too much to ask anyone to accept, even an assassin.

Noah didn't blame Gage. He remembered the things his mother told him before she died. She knew humans wouldn't accept someone who could shift. She had warned him over and over again not to become involved with one.

Noah was in a nightmare of his own making. He knew the rules; keep a low profile, never tell anyone what

he was, and never ever have sex with anyone. Noah had pretty much broken all of those rules and now he was paying the price.

He moved about the room, tidying it up and making the bed when he couldn't think of anything else to do. His mother always told him to clean up after himself even if he was away from home.

Home.

Noah suddenly had a deep need to be home, surrounded by the things that defined his life — his books, his mother's small collection of porcelain birds, his carefully organized life.

"Come here, Precious," Noah said as he beckoned the cat closer. She stared at him for a moment then started cleaning her fur as if she didn't have a care in the world. Noah sighed and walked over to pick the cat up.

He grabbed her carrier and carefully placed her inside, shutting the door. Noah pulled on his jacket then grabbed his bag and the cat carrier. He looked around the room once more to make sure he wasn't forgetting anything then nodded, satisfied that his mother would be proud of him if she saw the neat and tidy room.

"Come on, Precious, we're going home."

CHAPTER 6

Gage was freaked the fuck out. He'd just watched a man shift into a cat, not a large cat like seen on one of those the nature channels but a house cat. Gage thought if he was going to see something that freaky at least it could be a tiger or a lion, maybe even a panther. But no, he had to see a man shift into a damn house cat.

And it was a man he'd fucked. Hell, he'd drunk the man's blood, even if by accident. Was he doomed now to turn into some sort of shifter? Would he be a house cat too? Would he howl at the moon or drink blood?

Would he have fleas?

Gage was too tired and too keyed up all at the same time to try and figure this out on his own. He needed answers, and he knew where he wanted to start. Someone had sent him out on this mission. They would have the answers he wanted, or he would be a lot meaner to them than he'd been to Noah.

Gage hailed a cab and climbed in. He gave directions to the street he wanted then leaned back to stare at the city lights as they went by. He felt bad about leaving Noah the way he did, but the situation was just too freaky.

Gage had seen a lot of things in his life, some good,

some not so good. He'd never seen anyone shift into another creature. He felt like he had been watching a Hollywood movie. He wasn't afraid of Noah, not exactly, more like stunned by what he saw.

Besides, Noah was a house cat.

Gage chuckled and shook his head slightly. He'd freaked over a damn house cat. Maybe it was the whole shifting thing that really had him flipping out because Noah was one of the gentlest souls he'd ever met. He wouldn't hurt anyone, even if he was a shifting furry cat.

I must be losing my mind, Gage thought when a pang of regret and guilt filled him. He rubbed his hand over his face before looking out the window again. No matter what he did, or how freaked out he was, he couldn't stop thinking about Noah.

He worried that someone was really trying to kill Noah. He worried that the man must be feeling miserable right now because he'd been abandoned. He worried that Noah was cold. Hell, Gage even worried about that damn fat cat of Noah's.

Maybe leaving Noah and his cat in a by-the-hour motel unprotected wasn't Gage's smartest move. He just hadn't known how to deal with the situation, and that made him feel out of control. Gage hated not being in control.

After years spent in the foster care system with other people making all of his decisions, including where he could live and when he could live there, Gage had a very hard time giving up control of his own life.

And the feelings that had started to grow inside of him for Noah were way out of control. Gage had never been so fascinated by a man, or a woman, in his life. He had still been trying to figure them out when the whole shifting thing happened and propelled Gage into the unreal and unbelievable.

He wasn't sure he could go back. Hell, he wasn't sure he wanted to go back. Going back to what he was before meant no Noah and that...

Well, shit! Gage thought to himself as he realized that going back to before he knew Noah wasn't an option. Gage reached into his pocket and grabbed his phone, flipping it open. He hit speed dial, calling one of the few people he trusted.

"Yo!"

"It's me."

"Hi, me, what can I do ya for?"

Gage let his head fall back against the backseat. He so didn't want to do this. He hated asking for help. He knew Dean would help him but that help came at a price,

bragging rights.

"I need some help," he finally spit out.

"Whoa, the big man needs my help?" Dean whistled then started chuckling. "You know what this means, dude."

Gage rolled his eyes even though Dean couldn't see it. It made him feel better. "Yeah, I know, but I still need your help."

"Bragging rights it is." Dean laughed. "Okay, dude, what can I do for you?"

"Meet me at the fountain in twenty minutes and bring your laptop."

"My laptop?" Dean asked, suddenly serious.

"Yes."

Dean had two laptops, the one the agency issued him and his own personal laptop. Dean's personal laptop was much better than his agency-issued one and had access to a lot more places, especially those he wasn't supposed to have access to.

"I'll be there."

Gage snapped his phone closed without saying goodbye and put it back in his pocket. He leaned forward and tapped on the glass between him and the cab driver.

"Take me to the city park."

The ride was quick but not quick enough for Gage.

He ran his fingers around the collar of his shirt, suddenly feeling like he couldn't breathe. His shirt felt tight across his chest. He was starting to feel anxious and unsettled, and he didn't know why. Gage felt like he was about to crawl out of his skin.

He had money in the tray between the seats and the door thrown open before the taxi completely stopped. Gage jumped out and sprinted toward the fountain, only slowing when he spotted Dean sitting on the edge of the cement pool.

"Thanks for meeting me," Gage said as soon as he reached the man.

"Sure, you sounded pretty serious. How bad is it?"

"Truthfully, pretty bad." Gage chuckled nervously as paced back and forth in front of Dean. "Either I've totally lost my mind or the world as I know it is a Hollywood movie."

"So, what can I do to help?"

"Tell me I'm not crazy."

"I'm not so sure about that, but you're one of the most level-headed men I know."

"You may not think that when I tell you what I have to say."

Dean's blond eyebrow arched, but he didn't say

anything. Gage stopped pacing and rubbed his hand down his face again then planted his hands on his hips and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

"It started yesterday when I went on a mission. It was supposed to be an easy one, go in, eliminate the target, and leave, only the intel was faulty and a gang of armed men were waiting for me."

"Shit! Did you report this to Trent?"

"Not yet because things just got weirder from there."

"Oh?"

"I snuck out a window and climbed into the first passing car I could find, some young guy named Noah was driving."

"Do you think he's involved?"

"I thought so at first, I mean, it just seemed all too convenient, you know? So, I tracked him down and watched him for awhile then went up to his apartment. I had every intention of eliminating him if he was an issue."

"Well, was he?"

"Not in the way you'd think." Gage laughed nervously.

"Fuck, you slept with him, didn't you?"

Gage nodded.

"Did you kill him?"

"Not exactly."

"So, what, you need me to eliminate him or something?"

"No!" Gage shouted.

Dean blinked.

This was so not going the way Gage envisioned it, not that he had an idea of how it would go exactly, just... "I don't want anyone eliminating him, and that might be part of the problem. I think someone is trying to kill him."

"Someone?" Dean asked as he jumped to his feet.

"Who? One of us?"

"I don't know, but I think Noah does."

"He knows who is trying to kill him?"

"Look, you need to understand, Noah isn't like other people." Gage grimaced as he made the biggest understatement of the year. "He's different, special. He just doesn't do things like we do. Hell, the man can't walk down a city block without running into something but..."

"But?"

"Someone broke into his house and then put a bomb in his car, and I seriously think they want him dead."

"Jeez, Gage, who the fuck is this man involved with?"

"The rat pack? The furball fraternity?" Gage laughed then slapped his hand over his mouth when the sound became strained. At Dean's concerned look, Gage shook his head. "You'll think I'm nuts."

"Ah hell, Gage, I already do, so just spill it."

"After I killed the two men that broke into his apartment, Noah and I left, which is when the car exploded. I thought getting to someplace relatively safe was our best course of action so I took him to a hotel for safekeeping."

"Sounds reasonable."

"And then he turned into a cat."

Dean stared at Gage for several long agonizing moments then quietly gathered up his laptop. "You know, Gage, if you want to go out and get drunk or get high, that's your business. Don't drag me into it."

"Dean, I'm not kidding."

Dean just looked at him.

"Look, I'm not drunk. You can smell my breath. And I'm not high. Look at my eyes. I'm perfectly serious."

"People don't turn into cats, Gage."

"Noah did."

"And someone didn't see it? Call the police?" Dean scoffed.

"He... uh... turned into a house cat."

Gage was really starting to get tired of the deadpan looks Dean kept giving him. He started to wonder if this was how Noah felt when he told other people he could shift. Maybe it would be easier if Gage could just show Dean?

"Okay, you don't believe me. I understand that. Come with me to meet Noah and he can show you himself." Dean still looked hesitant. "Please, Dean. I swear I am not crazy. Just let me prove it to you."

"Fine, but if you're fucking with me, it's going to be quite some time before I answer your phone calls again."

"Fair enough."

"So, where is your little pussy cat?" Dean asked as he fell into step with Gage.

Gage frowned. He wasn't sure he liked Dean making fun of Noah. It just didn't sit well with him for some reason. "I left him at the hotel."

"If someone is out to kill him do you think that was a good idea?"

"Not now, but at the time, yeah, it seemed like a good idea."

Gage hailed the first cab he saw and gave the driver directions back to the hotel. The drive back seemed to take longer than the drive away. The palms of Gage's hands

began to itch so he clenched and unclenched them several times. Nothing seemed to work.

Something was wrong, Gage could feel it. And he didn't like it, because if something happened to Noah it would be his fault, and he knew it. He'd left the scared little man unprotected.

Gage was beginning to wonder who the monster was here. Noah had never done anything horrible to him. Gage doubted Noah had ever done anything horrible to anyone. No one who loved their cat as much as Noah did could be that bad.

Gage, on the other hand, was feeling more and more like the monster in the situation. He was trained to spot the bad guys, to track and kill them if needed. He was trained to protect himself by eliminating any threat.

So, who was the monster?

As soon as the cab pulled up in front of motel, Gage jumped out and hurried to the room he'd rented. The first thing that struck Gage as odd was the unlocked door with the vacant sign around the doorknob. Gage instantly pulled his gun out and waited for Dean to join him. When the man leaned against the opposite side of the door frame, gun in hand, Gage kicked the door in.

He dipped his head in to look for an intruder then

pulled it back. When he heard nothing, he nodded to Dean and slowly walked in, scanning every inch of the room with a glance.

A quick trip into the bathroom showed that it was empty as well. Gage walked back into the main room as he pushed his gun back into its shoulder holster and looked around. Everything was neat as a pin. In fact, it looked better now than it did when he had arrived with Noah and the cat.

"So, where is he?"

"I don't know." And he really didn't like that one bit. There was no sign of Noah having been in the room except for how clean it was.

"But this is where you left him?"

"Yeah."

"How long ago?"

"I don't know." Gage shrugged. "An hour ago?"

"Could he have gone home?"

"No, Noah wouldn't go—" Gage suddenly knew that was exactly what Noah had done. The little shit had gone home, right back into the heart of danger. Gage groaned loudly as he raced to the door to flag down the taxi driver before he got away.

He was going to strangle Noah when he found

him... just as soon as he made sure the man was okay.

CHAPTER 7

Noah could hear the other cats meowing outside of his building. He knew if he looked out the window, there would be several milling about. They seemed to congregate to him now that he had shifted.

Noah had always had an affinity with cats, but he noticed on the trip home that it seemed highly increased. Every time he turned around, another cat was blocking his path. They were just ordinary house cats like he shifted into, but it was still a little creepy.

Noah tried to ignore the noise as he finished cleaning up the mess that had been left behind. Gage might have called the cleaners, but they really didn't know anything about cleaning. His apartment was a mess.

His only consolation was the lack of bodies on his floor. There wasn't even any blood, just some broken furniture and a mess. Noah had been surprised that the mess from the explosion was gone as well. Gage's cleaning crew worked fast. There was no sign of anything having blown up except for some charred cement.

Of course, Noah's car was missing, or what was left of it. Noah supposed it didn't really matter. He'd be dead soon enough and having a car then wouldn't really matter.

He knew it would only be a matter of time before the others came for him. He wanted to be prepared. Noah cleaned up as much of the mess as he could. He refused to leave a mess behind for someone else to clean up. He also didn't want people coming into his house and thinking he was lazy. His mother would have had a fit.

After he was done, Noah gathered together the information on his bank account, his bills, and his personal address book. People would need to be informed that he had died, utilities shut off, things like that.

Noah placed them all in a small cardboard box and set it in the middle of the dining room table with a note that Precious should be taken downstairs to Mrs. Turner. Someone should find it there.

The last thing Noah did was take a shower and dress in clean jeans and a simple cotton shirt. He still refused to be found dead with a dirty body. A man had to have standards after all.

He gathered up a throw blanket and climbed into his chair by the window, settling down with Precious in his lap. He wrapped the blanket around both of them and turned to stare out the window.

Noah stared out the window a lot. Sometimes watching people walk by his window on the street below

was better than watching television. People seemed to be in such a hurry, always running about. Very few stopped to take a moment and enjoy the world around them.

Noah just didn't understand that. There were so many beautiful things in the world to enjoy, like love and flowers, birds and colors, and Gage. Gage was really beautiful. Noah thought he could look at the man all day long and never get tired of looking. He just wished he had met the man earlier so he had more time to enjoy him.

Noah suddenly tensed. He could smell them coming. He glanced out the window and noted that the cats were all gone. Even Precious had gone still in his arms.

"This is it, Precious," Noah whispered as he hugged the cat to his chest for a moment. Then, he got up and crossed the room to put Precious in her cat carrier. He didn't want her getting in the way when the fighting began. He didn't want her hurt.

Noah put Precious and the cat carrier along with her bag of stuff over in the corner of the room by his closet. As he turned to face the room, he twisted his hands together nervously.

The apartment was neat and tidy, just like his mother would have had it. Noah just hoped it stayed that way. He had the feeling the coming confrontation was

going to be messy.

Noah went back to sit in his chair, facing the door this time. He folded the blanket neatly into a little square and placed it on the back of the chair, nervously stroking the fabric.

The waiting was driving him nuts. So many people were trying to kill him, and Noah just wished they would hurry up and get it over with so that he didn't have to keep waiting for the end to come. He didn't want to spend his life, however long it was, looking over his shoulder and waiting for someone to come for him.

Noah knew his behavior would be considered strange by other people. He wasn't running and hiding to keep himself alive. He was accepting the inevitable. Noah wasn't a killer. He didn't even think that way. There was no way he would be able to hide from those bent on killing him.

Besides, it wasn't like his life was that wonderful anyway. He went to work, and he came home. With the exception of Precious, Noah didn't have a lot of friends. Hell, he wasn't even sure he had one. He spent too much of his time trying to go unnoticed and not reveal his secret to make friends with other people.

It didn't help that most people thought he was odd

or daft. It was hard to make friends when people laughed behind his back and called him names. With the few people that did try and befriend him, Noah still had to keep at a distance.

Keeping away from other people had been ingrained in him by his mother from a very early age. It was the only way they wouldn't discover his secret. Noah spent his entire life doing just that. It didn't make him a lot of friends.

Except maybe Gage. Even if the man had left once he discovered Noah's secret, he still seemed to accept all of Noah's odd behaviors without calling him names or pointing at him. That was something.

Wasn't it?

Noah sighed and folded his hands together as he waited. He missed Gage. It had only been a couple of hours, and already he felt like his heart had been ripped out of his chest. Noah couldn't imagine what it would be like as more time went by.

Maybe that was why he waited patiently for the others to come end his life? Noah didn't know if he could survive without Gage in his life, and it was clear the man thought he was a freak.

Noah wiped away the tears that started to gather in

his eyes. His growing need for Gage would never end. Even Noah knew that. While his mother hadn't explained much to him, she had given him the basics.

The person who took his virginity would take his heart as well. He would never want to be with another person. He would crave Gage, need him like he needed air. Separation from the one who held his heart would be mentally and physically painful, growing worse with each passing moment.

Noah, at least, knew that was true. It wasn't that he doubted his mother's words. Just that he never thought to feel the connection he felt with Gage. Even now, after just a couple of hours, Noah's skin itched to be soothed by Gage's gentle touch.

Knowing his life was soon to end was almost a blessing in disguise for Noah. It would end the need he had to be with Gage, something Noah knew wasn't going to happen.

At least he'd had one night with Gage.

Noah leaned his head back against the chair back and closed his eyes. He wanted to be dreaming about Gage when the end came, thinking about how wonderful it felt to connect with someone on such an intimate level.

No wonder his mother warned him against being

with someone. When that someone took off, a huge aching hole was left behind. If the people coming to kill him didn't complete the job, Noah would kill himself from grief. He knew it. The craving for Gage was growing with each passing second.

The moon heating would make it even worse. Noah snorted angrily. He didn't think things could get much worse than they were right now, but if his mother was right about his connection to Gage, he was afraid to see what would happen when the full moon came and he went into heat.

Being a cat sucked.

Noah opened his eyes and turned his head to look across the room when he heard the door start to creak open. His heart pounded a little faster as two men dressed in black stepped into the room.

Noah drew up his courage and stood to face the two men. "I've been expecting you."

"We'll make this as painless as possible, Your Highness."

"I don't suppose we could skip the entire ordeal?" Noah asked, looking at the one man that spoke. The other one, the one with darker hair, remained silent as his eyes cautiously watched the entire room.

"You knew that wasn't possible when you found your mate."

Noah shrugged. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"I do apologize, Your Highness, but there is no other way. King Geraldo has ordered your execution. You knew this would happen. You said you were expecting us."

"Yes, I guess I did." Noah sighed deeply then pointed to the box on the dining table. "My effects are on the table. Please see that whoever is in charge gets the box and that my cat is taken downstairs to Mrs. Turner. Precious is already in her cat carrier."

"I'll see to it personally, Your Highness."

So polite. Noah almost rolled his eyes. Instead he nodded and glanced around the room. He knew he was just putting off the inevitable, but he couldn't seem to just give in. It would be so much easier if he did. It hadn't been this hard with Gage, though, and Noah didn't understand that.

Gage had made no bones about the fact that he came to kill Noah, just as the two men standing in front of him hadn't. Noah had willingly lain down and accepted his fate with Gage. With these two strangers, even though he knew it was going to happen, Noah couldn't seem to accept his fate.

"Please, Your Highness," the light-haired man said.
"Don't make this any harder than it has to be."

"I never asked for this, you know," Noah said. "I kept to myself. I stayed out of trouble, out of the limelight. I never tried to take the throne back from Geraldo, never. I just..." Noah shook his head and looked down at the fingers he was twisting together nervously. "I just wanted to feel something for a little while."

"I understand, Your Highness, but we are bound to follow the orders of the ruling king. Our understanding or sympathy with your situation does not negate our duty to the king."

"No, I suppose not." Noah sighed. "It just doesn't seem fair that I am to be condemned to death because I had sex. It wasn't like I tried to overthrow the throne or anything."

"Your ability to now shift is what has condemned you, Your Highness, and you well know it. You were warned. Others will be drawn to you now. They will turn away from King Geraldo and look to you for guidance. The king cannot have that, not if he wants to be an effective ruler."

"So, let him rule!" Noah flung his hand in the air in a sudden exasperated gesture. "Let him have the throne."

What do I care? I just want my mate."

"It is no longer up to you, Your Highness." The man almost sounded sad to Noah. "Your natural charisma will draw others to you whether you want it or not."

"My natural charisma?" Noah scoffed. "Are you mad? I don't have a natural charisma. I don't even have an unnatural charisma. I'm a nut job with a huge obsessive compulsive disorder. People think I'm a freak. They don't think I have charisma."

"Your Highness, please..."

As suddenly as it came, the fight went out of Noah. He didn't know why he was protesting anyway. Gage was gone. Nothing else seemed to matter. Noah drew in a deep breath then walked over to kneel at the feet of the two men. He folded his hands in his lap and bent his head forward, less for them and more to hide the tears of despair in his eyes.

"Just try not to make a mess of my apartment," Noah said. "It took me a long time to clean it up."

"I will see to it myself, Your Highness."

Noah closed his eyes when he felt a cold blade press against the back of his neck. He prayed it wouldn't hurt, that his death would be quick.

"I beg your forgiveness, Your Highness," one of the

men whispered. Noah thought the words were mildly amusing considering the man was asking forgiveness for killing him, but he could feel the reluctance coming off the man in waves.

"You have it," Noah whispered.

"Thank you, Your Highness."

Noah squeezed his eyes shut and tried to picture Gage in his mind as he felt the blade move away from his neck. The seconds seemed to tick by as he waited for the killing blow.

"Noah!"

Noah jerked around and fell on his butt when he heard Gage shout out his name. His eyes widened in shock when he saw Gage and another man climbing through his apartment windows. Both men held guns in their hands, aiming them at the two men standing behind Noah.

"Noah, come over here."

"Gage?"

"Come here, baby," Gage said, beckoning with his free hand.

"Gage, wha-what are you doing here?"

Noah only had eyes for Gage, drinking in his handsome form as the man edged closer to him. Gage's eyes were not on Noah but the two men behind him, but

Noah didn't care. He got to see Gage one last time before he died.

"Noah, I mean it, come over here."

Noah had started to move toward Gage, unable to resist the man's commanding tone, when he felt a hand land on his shoulder, holding him in place. He inhaled sharply, having forgotten about the two men there to kill him.

"You must not interfere," one of the men said vehemently.

"I won't let you kill Noah."

"His fate has already been decided. You only delay the inevitable."

"I don't think so," Gage said as he waved his gun at the men. "Step away from Noah and I might let you live."

"Regretfully, that is not possible."

"I'm not going to ask again."

Noah yelped when a hand wrapped in his hair and jerked his head back. He felt a sharp blade move across his throat again and tried not to swallow. It was hard considering he felt like he had a huge lump in his throat blocking the air to his lungs.

Noah's eyes widened when he heard Gage growl. The man actually growled. He tried to lower his head a bit to look at Gage, surprised by the fierce glare in the man's

eyes. Gage looked pissed.

"Hurt a hair on his head and you will die a very painful death."

One of the men, the one not holding a sword to Noah's throat, took a threatening step toward Gage. Noah tensed, the hairs on his arm standing on end as a low menacing growl pushed through his clenched teeth.

"No touching! Mine!" Noah shouted as the man took another step, raising his sword in the air. His mind went blank as he was filled with the need to protect Gage. Noah thrust the sword away from his neck and leapt to his feet, feeling several strands of hair rip out of his head.

With one jump, Noah was across the room, landing on the man going after Gage. He felt sharp claws extend from his fingertips and dug them deep into the man's flesh. The howl of pain that filled the room fed Noah's need to take vengeance on anyone who threatened Gage.

Noah hissed and sank his sharp teeth into the man's neck when he tried to shake him free. Noah hung on as hard as he could when the man yelled and grabbed at him, trying to dislodge him as they fell to the floor.

"Noah!"

Noah growled again when he felt someone grab him from behind. He turned his head and hissed until Gage's

face filtered through his rage-fogged brain.

"Let him go, love," Gage said softly.

Noah looked back at the scratched and bleeding man beneath him. He hissed again just for good measure then retracted his claws and slowly moved away from the injured man and into Gage's waiting arms.

Noah's purr started the moment he settled against Gage's chest and the man's arms wrapped around him. He tucked his head under Gage's chin and rubbed the side of his face back and forth against the man's skin, needing the intimate contact.

"Geez, he's purring."

Noah swung around and hissed at the man who had climbed through the window with Gage, partly to put the man in his place and partly because he was interrupting Noah's cuddle time. He flexed his claws just for good measure.

"Fuck!"

"Shut up, Dean," Gage snapped at the man but when he lowered his head and spoke to Noah, his voice was much gentler, softer. "It's okay, baby, purr all you want."

Noah pressed his face back into the soft valley of Gage's neck and resumed his purring. His hands gently kneaded Gage's shirt even though his claws were still

extended. He just made sure he was careful. He wouldn't hurt Gage for the world.

"How are you doing, Noah?"

Noah purred louder. He was doing great. Gage was looking down at him with concern in his face, not disdain. He also wasn't running screaming from the apartment. That had to be a plus.

"You came back."

"I had to." Gage chuckled quietly. "I promised to fuck you into the mattress if you told me the truth, remember?"

"Yeah." Noah felt his face flush with heat as he remembered Gage making that promise and what had followed. And then he remembered Gage's abhorrence at all that Noah was and stiffened in the man's arms.

He slowly pushed away from Gage and climbed to his feet. Noah suddenly felt cold, bone deep cold. He rubbed his hands up and down his arms and glanced around the room to find almost everyone there staring at him.

A yowl from the corner of the room caught Noah's attention. He turned, spotting Precious pushing her paw through the slots in the carrier door. He raced across the room and fell to his knees. He yanked the door open and pulled the cat out.

"Oh, Precious," he cried out as he cradled her to his chest. "I'm so sorry. I bet those big ol' men scared you, didn't they?"

Precious purred in Noah's arms much like he had moments ago when being held by Gage. Only Noah knew Precious would just continue to purr like any other normal cat. She *was* a normal cat. She wasn't cursed to be a shifter like Noah.

"Dude, your cat has a cat?"

CHAPTER 8

Saying he was in a state of shock would have been understatement and not one Gage was ready to put voice to. He wasn't sure which situation was stranger, watching Noah shift into a cat or watching the man attack someone else, spitting and hissing? Both were at the top of Gage's weirdo meter.

But strangely enough, they were getting less weird by the minute. Watching Noah attack someone who was threatening him made Gage feel ten feet tall. He couldn't stop grinning until Noah refused to meet his gaze, and then he frowned.

"Noah?"

"I think it would probably be best if you and your friend left."

"What?" Gage was stunned. He thought from Noah's actions that the man was happy to see him. He hoped Noah was happy to see him. He was happy to see Noah. "What's going on here, Noah?"

"It's nothing for you to be concerned about." The smile Noah sent him made Gage's skin crawl. It wasn't real, and it didn't reach his milky green eyes. Gage could only see misery in Noah's eyes.

"Not good enough, love."

"I'm afraid that this time it's going to have to be."

Noah put Precious down on the floor and stood. He waved his hand around the room to the others standing there staring at them. "This does not concern you."

"It does now," Gage said, clenching his hands into fists as he tried desperately to hold onto the anger that threatened to break free. "I became involved the moment we had sex in the shower."

Gage had the satisfaction of watching Noah's eyes widen at his words. He spread his arms wide to encompass the entire room. "Now, do you want to tell me what in the hell is going on here? Why are these men trying to kill you and why the hell are you allowing it?"

Noah just pressed his lips together and shook his head. Gage suddenly had the impression that no matter what he said, Noah wasn't going to tell him anything. There was a stubborn streak in Noah as hard as steel.

Luckily, Gage knew how to break through that stubborn streak. He stalked across the living room and grabbed Noah by the arm, propelling him toward the bedroom door. In the doorframe, he paused to glance over his shoulder at Dean, nodding toward the two men.

"Keep an eye on them," Gage said. "We'll be a few

minutes. I need to convince Noah of the merits of being truthful with me."

"Done."

Gage nodded and pushed Noah into the bedroom, shutting the door behind him. He leaned back against it and crossed his arms over his chest as he regarded the nervous man watching him from across the room.

"Talk, Noah. Tell me what's going on here. Why are those two men here to kill you and why are you allowing it to happen?"

Noah again pressed his lips together and shook his head. Gage sighed deeply and reached for the hem of his shirt. "We've been down this road before, Noah. You know I can get you to talk."

"No."

Gage smirked and pulled his shirt off over his head, dropping it on the floor. He started stalking Noah across the room as he slowly unbuttoned his pants. He could feel the man's eyes watching his every movement as much as he could see them.

There was a hunger burning in Noah's milky green eyes that almost made Gage wish that they were just fooling around. He didn't want to force Noah to talk unless he had to. He wanted the man to willingly tell him

everything.

That didn't mean he wasn't above being devious to get what he wanted. Gage was quickly learning that Noah had a weakness for him. Gage just hoped he never had to admit how much of a weakness he had for Noah.

"You will talk, Noah, one way or another."

Gage pushed his shoes off his feet then reached down to pull his socks off. Noah still watched every move Gage made, but his breathing grew harsher. His milky green eyes were growing steadily darker, turning almost emerald green in color.

"Gage," he hissed softly then licked his lips, "you can't..." Noah grimaced. "We can't..." Noah shook his head. "You don't understand."

"Then explain it to me, Noah, so that I do understand."

Gage sat down on the end of the bed and held out his hand to Noah, waiting patiently. Noah just stared at him for several moments then huffed and walked over to take Gage's hand, sitting down beside him.

"I'm listening, love."

"I'm not your love so stop calling me that," Noah snapped, surprising Gage with his vehemence. "You think I'm a freak."

"I don't think you're a freak, Noah," Gage insisted, "just a little different. You have to admit, shifting into a house cat is not normal."

"It is where I come from."

"And just where do you come from?" Gage was so curious he could barely hold himself still. It was obvious Noah was not your everyday human. If shifting into a house cat was normal where he came from, Gage had to wonder about Precious. "Can Precious shift?"

"No." Noah laughed. "Precious is just a cat."

"Just a cat? Noah, do you have any idea how odd that statement is?" Gage wished he hadn't spoken when Noah pulled away from him and seemed to curl into himself. Gage reached over and grabbed Noah's hand, refusing to have that connection between them broken. "Baby, you're going to have to give me some leeway for being surprised here. Until you shifted back at the motel, I didn't know anything like that could happen outside of movies."

"I'm not a freak," Noah murmured.

"I didn't say you were."

Noah's face was part anger filled, part confusion when he turned to look at Gage. "But you did, back at the motel. You said I was a freak."

"No, I said it was a freaky situation, and it was. I'd never seen anyone shift before. But never once did I call you freaky, Noah, so don't say I did. Don't put words in my mouth that aren't there."

"Is it any different?"

"It's very different, Noah. People get freaked out by weird situations all of the time, especially when things happen that they don't expect or have never experienced before. That does not mean that the people involved in the situation are freaky."

"So, you're not freaked out that I can shift into a cat?"

"I'll be truthful with you, Noah, it does still freak me out a little. But that has nothing to do with you, not really. I still think you're very special. Besides, I just watched you attack a man who was threatening to harm me. In my book, that means something."

Gage gaped as Noah suddenly shifted again. Almost in the blink of an eye, the man that sat next to him shifted into a white house cat. Dark Emerald green eyes blinked up at him as the cat sat down, his tail flicking back and forth.

"And this?" Noah whispered into Gage's mind, which probably freaked him out more than anything he'd experienced in the last few hours. *"Can you really say this*

doesn't freak you out?"

"I'd be really interested to know how you do that, because yeah, speaking to me in my mind is a little freaky."

"Too freaky?" Noah asked, again in Gage's mind.

"Last time you were freaked out you left. Are you going to leave again?"

"I may have left last time but I came back, didn't I?"

The cat's head tilted slightly. *"Why did you come back?"*

"I'm not sure really." Gage frowned. "I didn't plan on coming back when I left. You probably need to know that. But I was sitting in the taxi, and I couldn't stop thinking about you. And it wasn't... I kept wondering if you were safe, if you were okay. Hell, I worried that you weren't warm enough. It just didn't make sense to me so I decided I needed to come back and see you."

"Only, I wasn't there."

"No, you weren't, and we're going to have to discuss that, Noah. It's not okay to place yourself in danger." Gage leaned back in surprise when Noah suddenly shifted back to his human form, fully clothed and all. "How do you do that and what happens to your clothes when you shift?"

"That's what you want to know?" Noah chuckled softly.

Gage shrugged. "I imagine I'll have a lot of questions for you but, yeah, I'm curious."

"I don't know exactly what happens to my clothes. When I shift, they just kind of fade away I guess. When I shift back, they're just there."

"And the shifting thing? How does that happen? Does it hurt?"

"It hurt the first time I shifted, but it hurt less this time." Noah glanced down at the blanket covering the bed and started plucking at white fabric. "When I shift, I just think of how I want to look and it happens."

"So, how long have you been shifting? Were you born this way or..."

"No, I was born this way."

"And the shifting thing?"

"I... um... I shifted for the first time in the motel with you."

Gage gaped. "You've never shifted before?"

Noah's hand worked frantically on the comforter, his nervousness showing in each pluck of his fingers.

"Because of who I am, I couldn't shift until... until we... well, you know, and..."

"Wait, wait, because of who you are?" Gage asked. "Who are you?"

Noah folded into himself again, and just when Gage thought he was getting through to the man. "It doesn't matter."

"You've said that before, love. I didn't believe you then, and I don't believe you now."

"Gage, you..." Noah shook his head. "You don't understand so just drop it."

"I'm not going to drop it, Noah."

Gage couldn't remember when he had been so frustrated with someone. Noah might be gentle and shy and just a little odd, but he was the most stubborn man Gage had ever met. It was like pulling teeth to get the man to say anything.

"Why can't you just leave it alone?" Noah snapped as he jumped to his feet and started pacing in front of the bed. His hands waved wildly around the room. Gage was pretty sure it was the most expressive he'd ever seen Noah except when they had sex. "You don't want to know, believe me because what I have to say is a lot freakier than me simply shifting into a cat."

Gage wasn't sure that was possible. "Noah, just tell me."

"Fine!" Noah bit out. "You want to know the truth? You fucked me in the shower and you didn't kill me like

you were supposed to and now I have to pay for it for the rest of my life, however long that may be."

"Excuse me?" Gage jumped to his feet and stepped over to stand in front of Noah, stopping his pacing. He planted his hands on his hips and leaned down to glare at Noah. "Are you saying all of this shit is my fault because I didn't kill you?"

"Yes!"

Gage blinked, stunned. He hadn't really expected that reaction from Noah. He wasn't sure what he'd expected exactly but Noah being angry at him because he didn't kill the man wasn't it. Gage rubbed his hand down his face as he stepped back to sit on the bed. He was very confused.

"Noah, why do you want to die so much?" It made Gage ache to even say the words. He didn't understand Noah's willingness to die. He wasn't sure he ever would.

"I don't want to die," Noah said quietly as if the fight had suddenly gone out of him. "I never wanted to die, but I know it's going to happen, and I'm tired of waiting for it. I just wish one of you would get it over and done with."

"Well, let's get this straight right now. I have no intention of killing you, ever. So stop waiting for it to come from me because it's not going to happen."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want to kill you!" When the corner of Noah's lips turned down in a frown, Gage was even more confused. It was like the guy was saddened by the fact that Gage didn't want to kill him. "Noah—"

"Do you know what will happen to me if you or one of those men in the other room don't kill me?" Noah whispered. "And that's assuming they don't send someone else to do the job."

"You'll live a long and healthy life?"

"No really." Noah's chuckle sounded more self-depreciating than happy. "Little by little, I'll go insane until I either have to be killed for the safety of others or kill myself because I can't control myself anymore."

Gage swallowed hard. "Why?" he choked out.

"There's this funny thing about me," Noah said. "My mother warned me about it, and I knew she was right, but I figured if you were going to kill me, it wouldn't matter. But you didn't and now it does and—"

"What thing, Noah?"

"I bond with the first person I have sex with."

"You what?"

"Even in the shifter world I'm a freak!"

"Noah, you're not a freak."

"I am a freak," Noah cried out. "I bonded with you

and now I can't ever be with anyone else again in my life and you..." Noah sniffled. "You have no idea what it will be like for me."

"So tell me," Gage said as he wrapped his arm around Noah's shoulder and pulled the man's head to his chest. Noah resisted for a moment then started rubbing his face against the bare skin on Gage's collarbone.

"We mated when we had sex in the shower. I won't be able to stand to have anyone else touch me, ever. Being separated from you will become a physical pain. I won't eat. I won't sleep. I won't be able to think of anything but being with you again. Already my skin itches to feel your touch, and it will only get worse the longer we're separated."

"So, who says we're going to be separated?" Noah's mouth was already hanging open by the time his head whipped back to look up at Gage in shock. Gage chuckled and reached over to gently close Noah's mouth. "Why do you think it's so important to me to know everything, Noah?"

"Because you're nuts?"

"That may well be true, but I really need to know everything because I have no intention of going anywhere without you, and in order to protect you from whatever

you're going through, I need to know why someone wants to kill you. I'd also like to know more about you and how this whole mating thing happened."

"We had sex. That's how it happened."

"And we'll be having sex again, I'm sure." Gage grinned at the stunned look on Noah's face. "I don't know about you, but I enjoyed myself a lot, and I'd like to try it again, at least a few hundred times."

"You do remember that I shift into a cat, right?" Noah asked as he pushed away from Gage a little to look up at him easier.

"It's kind of hard to miss, Noah." Gage pointed to the hand Noah had on his leg. "Especially when you keep kneading my thigh."

Noah snatched his hand away, his face burning red. "Sorry."

Gage grabbed Noah's hand and brought it back to his thigh, patting it gently. "I actually kind of like it, love."

"You really need to stop calling me that," Noah groaned. "You don't mean it."

"I don't know how I feel about you yet, Noah." And Gage wasn't sure he ever really would. Noah was just too confusing for him to settle on any one emotion. "But I do know I don't like being away from you. I worry about you

when I can't see you. I know I find myself doing things with you that I've never done before."

"That's just the mating bond. It will go away when I'm dead."

"Noah, you're not going to die," Gage snapped. He felt like shaking the man until his teeth rattled. "I won't let it happen."

"You can't stop it."

"I can if you tell me why they want to kill you."

Noah nearly rolled his eyes. Gage could see the need to do so in Noah's face. He just arched an eyebrow at the man and waited silently.

"Fine, now that I can shift and I've mated with you, I've become a threat to the ruler of my people."

"The who?"

"When I was an infant, my father was killed. My mother always thought he was murdered, but she couldn't prove it and everyone said it was just her grief talking. Mates don't do well when one of them dies."

"Another reason why you should tell me everything."

"You're just not going to let this go, are you?"

"Nope, so spill."

This time, Noah did roll his eyes. Gage just

chuckled.

"My mother snuck me away and hid us. She thought, since I was next in line for leadership, that my life would be in danger. She warned me time and time again that I would be safe if I didn't mate with anyone."

"That seemed to work out well for you."

"You were supposed to kill me after we had sex, remember? If you had, none of this would have happened."

Gage's eyes narrowed. "And you came to that conclusion because of what?"

"Because I couldn't shift until I mated."

"What does you being able to shift have to do with anyone else?"

Noah jumped to his feet and stalked across the room to the window. He whipped the curtain back and pointed. "That's what this has to do with everyone else."

Confused, Gage stood up and walked to the window. He was surprised to see over ten cats walking about on the sidewalk below Noah's window. The moment they spotted Noah, the cats stopped walking and started meowing, and rather loudly too.

"What are they doing?" Gage frowned. "Are they shifters like you?"

"No one is like me, Gage." Noah snorted. He let the

curtain fall back into place and walked across the room. "I told you, even in the shifter world, I'm a freak."

"And that means what exactly?"

"Do you really think there is a world out there full of shifting house cats?"

"I wouldn't really know, Noah. You're the first shifter I've ever met." Gage frowned as he considered that statement. "I think."

"Actually, there are more around than you think, entire packs and prides and the like. We're all over the place, blending in with humans in almost every area of the world."

"So, how are you so different?"

"Have you ever watched any of those nature channels?" Noah asked as he sat back down on the end of the bed.

"Sure, hasn't everyone?" Gage shrugged.

"Wolves mate for life, just as my kind do. They also have a hierarchy in their packs, just as my kind do. Only, in a wolf pack, the strongest rule."

"And in your... uh... pack?"

"Pride."

"Like a lion pride?"

"Exactly like a lion pride. The members of my pride

shift into lions and tigers and such, oh my."

Gage's eyes narrowed. He felt like he was missing a large piece of a puzzle, and Noah was feeding him each piece very slowly. "So, you shift into a house cat because...?"

"In my pride, the direct line in the ruling family shifts into house cats. That's why they want to kill me. Now that I can shift, I am living proof of my royal status. Since both of my parents are dead, I am also the only one alive who can shift into a house cat, which means there is no denying my right to rule. Anyone who looks at me when I shift would know it."

"Shit!"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"They want to kill you to keep you from taking over?"

"Wouldn't you if you had been ruling the pride for over twenty-five years?"

"So, whoever is currently ruling is trying to kill you?"

"My Uncle Geraldo has been in charge since my father died. In the beginning, he was just supposed to rule the pride until I came of age. He's not a direct bloodline cat so he can't rule if there is someone else to take his place."

"You, in other words?"

Noah nodded.

"Why haven't they tried to kill you before now?"

"Because before now, I couldn't shift. I wasn't a threat to anyone." Noah shrugged. "Besides, until I mated with you, they couldn't find me."

"I'm not seeing the connection here, Noah."

"Basically, before we mated, I was just human. Everything that was cat in me was suppressed. When we mated, it released the flood gates, and my cat came out. Others of my kind are now drawn to me." Noah waved his hand toward the window. "Hence, the cat stalking thing."

"So, they couldn't find you before now because you'd never had sex before?"

"Yep."

"I guess that kind of makes me responsible for you now, doesn't it?" Gage asked as he sat down beside Noah. "Since I took your virginity and all."

"No, of course not. I would never expect you to—"

"What if I want to be?"

CHAPTER 9

Noah blinked up at Gage as complete shock rolled through his body. "You don't mean that," he whispered. "You can't mean that. You don't know what you're getting yourself into."

"So, tell me, Noah."

"If we continue to be together, the bond between us will just grow stronger."

"Is that such a bad thing, babe?"

"You don't understand, Gage, we won't be able to be apart. The intensity of whatever is between us will get worse."

"I'm still not seeing the downside here, Noah."

"My strength, what makes me a royal, is that I am the heart and soul of the pride. You will become the strength."

"I'll be able to shift?"

"Not exactly," Noah hedged.

"Then what?"

"Since I am essentially a house cat, not one of the stronger breeds, as my mate you will become what I don't have." Gage's eyebrow shot up when Noah's eyes began to roam over his body. "You'll grow bigger, stronger. You'll

be strong enough to take on a full grown lion in your present form. You'll be my protector."

"I guess that explains why my pants suddenly feel so tight." Gage chuckled.

"Your sense of smell, of taste, your hearing, all of it will increase. You'll be able to run faster, jump higher, do things you never could do before."

"There's something you're not telling me, Noah, because I'm not seeing the downside here." Noah tried to resist when Gage grabbed his chin and lifted his face, but Gage was having none of it. "Tell me, Noah."

"O-once a month on the full moon, I go into heat."

"Heat?"

"I'll need lots and lots of sex and guess what, big guy, since you're my mate, I'll need it from you. And as I'm your mate, you'll also be obsessed with fucking me during this time." Gage's grin was slow and sensuous and made Noah's heart beat faster. "You're not getting it, Gage. When I mean I will need a lot of sex, I'm not kidding. We'll fuck until we pass out."

"On the full moon, you say?" Gage asked as he leaned closer to Noah.

"Yeah," Noah said as he leaned back, not sure where Gage was going with his question, but he had the

distinct feeling he was about to find out.

"Want to start practicing now?"

"Gage!" Noah exclaimed as Gage pushed him back down onto the bed and half covered his body. Noah put his hands out in front of his body, groaning when they connected with Gage's bare chest. "You can't."

"Why not?"

"Because if we do this, it will only strengthen the bond between us."

"Good."

Noah opened his mouth to say something to Gage, only to have it filled with the man's tongue. Noah instantly felt heat flush his body and groaned as his body started to acclimate itself to his mate. Gage really didn't understand how powerful his smell, his touch was, Noah knew that.

He didn't understand the constant craving Noah had for him, for his touch, or the simple feel of Gage's breath blowing across his skin. Noah would strip down naked in the middle of the street if that's what Gage wanted. He wouldn't care who watched. His need for Gage would override everything, especially when the moon was full.

But Noah only had so much resistance, and he had tried to warn Gage. So, when he felt the man's hand slide into his jeans, Noah gave up the fight and opened himself

up to his mate, giving himself over to the bond between them.

When Gage started to strip his clothes from his body, Noah eagerly helped. If Gage protested so much that he wanted this, Noah would give it to him. He was helpless to stop it. He didn't want to stop it.

Noah lay back on the bed and watched Gage push his own pants down his legs. His breath caught in his throat when he took in the size of the shaft sticking out hard and proud from Gage's body. Gage might not know it yet but the size of the man's cock had increased along with the rest of his body. He'd find out soon enough.

"Do you really think we should be doing this when the other room is full of people?" Noah didn't exactly want to dissuade Gage, but he had to ask. It seemed like the polite thing to do under the circumstances. "They are waiting on us."

"Let them wait." Gage grinned as he climbed onto the bed and moved up to settle himself between Noah's thighs. "This is much more important."

Arguing would be rude so Noah kept his mouth shut. Besides, he'd much rather be in here with Gage than out in the living room with two men who were sent to kill him. They weren't nearly as handsome as Gage was.

"Can I..." Noah bit his lip, feeling self-conscious. He'd never had a lover before, and his mother certainly never told him what the proper etiquette was for dealing with one. He didn't want to cross any boundaries he wasn't supposed to.

"Can you what, love?"

Noah felt his face heat up as he tried to meet Gage's curious eyes. "Can I..." Noah shrugged. "I've never... I want to touch you. Is that allowed?"

When Gage's eyebrows shot up, Noah wondered if he had crossed that invisible line until Gage suddenly grabbed him around the waist and rolled over onto his back. Noah found himself straddling Gage's hips.

"Baby, you can do anything you want. There's nothing that isn't allowed between us. If you want to touch me, touch me. I certainly plan on touching you."

Noah nearly swallowed his tongue as he gazed down at what he considered the most perfect body in the world, maybe in existence, ever. There was smooth muscled skin everywhere just begging to be touched, licked.

And Noah was just the cat to do it.

He started at Gage's neck, licking the strong corded muscles that presented themselves when Gage arched his

head back, giving Noah total access. Gage's skin tasted salty, but there was an underlying masculine flavor that made Noah's tongue tingle. It made him want more.

Gage's chest was even better. The firm muscles quivered when Noah dragged his tongue across them, the man's nipples firming into hard little nubs. Noah grinned when he heard Gage groan and the man's hands started stroking down his back.

Gage had no idea what that touch did to him. Noah knew that. The soft caress, the touch of Gage's hand stroking down the middle of his back to the small concave at the bottom of his spine just above his ass made Noah purr.

Noah was a cat, after all.

"God, that is so fucking hot, Noah," Gage whispered. "I love it when you purr. It makes my dick hard."

Noah purred louder. He was all for making Gage hard. Hard was good. But so were the tight muscles trembling beneath his tongue. Noah couldn't figure out what he liked more, the rigid muscles of Gage's abdomen that rippled under his touch or the strong masculine flavor that exploded across his tongue every time he licked the man's skin.

The farther south he licked, the stronger the flavor became. Noah was starting to become addicted to the strong fragrance. He wanted to roll in it, make it cover his entire body. He wanted to be bathed in Gage's scent.

"Gage," he whispered. He swallowed hard then he scooted down farther to reach the hard cock standing up from Gage's groin. And it was such a beautiful cock, too, with heavy veins running up the thick shaft. A large purplish mushroom-shaped head promised pleasure beyond Noah's wildest dreams.

Noah hadn't gotten a real good look at Gage's body when they had sex in the shower. He'd been too preoccupied with feeling the long shaft moving in and out of his ass to really take a good look, but now he did, and the looking just made Noah ache to taste.

He leaned in and ran his tongue up the side of the shaft. His eyes widened when Gage groaned and the cock in front of him jumped and jerked, small pearlescent beads of pre-cum pooling on the tip. Noah stuck his tongue out and licked the droplets away.

"*Oh god,*" he whispered through their mental bond as the tangy taste of Gage's essence exploded in his mouth. Noah had never tasted anything like it, which made sense as this was as close as he had ever been to a real cock. But

still, Noah never expected Gage to taste so good. *"You taste really good."*

"I'm glad you think so."

Noah couldn't help but laugh when Gage chuckled. And that actually kind of surprised him. He thought sex was all intense, moaning and groaning until the deed was done. He never realized that there might be light-hearted laughter involved too.

Noah grinned up at Gage right before swallowing the man down. He kept his eyes connected to Gage's, watching in shock as the hazel color darkened to a deep brown, the whites almost bleeding out under the intense shade.

"Are you sure you haven't done this before?" Gage rasped.

"I'm sure."

Gage's head dropped back on the bed as he chuckled again. "You're a fucking natural."

"Glad you think so."

"Why don't you swing that ass around here so I can get you prepared?" Gage asked as he lifted his head again to stare down at Noah. "I'm not sure how much longer I can hold out."

"Then boy do I have a surprise for you." Noah

regretfully lifted his mouth from the cock he'd been lavishing and scooted up to straddle Gage's hips once again. He could feel Gage's cock press between his butt cheeks, throbbing.

"Oh?" One of Gage's dark brown eyebrows arched.

"Remember me telling you that my body will now only accept you?"

"Yeah."

Noah leaned up on his knees and reached between his legs to grab Gage's cock in his hand. He placed the head of the man's cock against his aching hole. Noah waited a moment until he felt himself opening up then slowly started to slide down, impaling himself on Gage's cock.

"Noah! Wait! No!" Gage grabbed Noah's hips and tried to halt his decent. "Baby, you're not prepared, stretched. We haven't even used lube. I don't want to hurt you."

"See, that's the great thing about mating a cat," Noah said, his voice harsh from the blasts of pleasure shooting through his body as his nerve endings exploded. "My body is now made for you and only you. It craves you. I crave you."

"Fuck, Noah," Gage groaned when Noah finally settled all of the way down on him. Noah watched the

man's eyes close for a moment, his jaw clenching. When Gage opened his eyes a moment later, they glowed with a burning desire that sent Noah's heart racing.

"When I smell your arousal, my body prepares itself for your possession, but only yours," Noah grinned as delight swept through him. He'd never thought to be able to say these words to someone. "If anyone else tried to fuck me, my body wouldn't allow it. It allows only you to claim me now."

"Fuck. I guess this kind of takes commitment to a whole new level, huh?"

"I did warn you."

"You did." Gage's forehead wrinkled, and Noah grew worried until the man began to speak again "So, you're saying the scent of my arousal loosens you up?"

"Yes." Noah nodded. "When you become aroused, you put off pheromones. When I smell them, it's like a signal to my body that you're about to claim me. And, since my body craves your touch, your seed, it prepares the way for you. My body even creates a natural lubrication to ease your way."

Gage looked like he didn't believe him so Noah moved his hips, pulling up then slamming back down onto the cock in his ass. The sensation of Gage filling him was

almost more than Noah could handle. He dropped his head back on his shoulders and let out a deep groan.

"My body now answers only to you, my mate."

"Fuck yeah!" Gage cried out before he gripped Noah's hips tight in his hands and thrust up into him. Noah cried out as he felt Gage's knees come up behind him, the man planting his feet into the mattress for leverage as he began thrusting up into him.

Noah was overwhelmed as sensations racked his body. Wave after wave of pleasure flowed over him, through him. When Gage rolled them over and grabbed his legs, Noah eagerly lifted them up over the man's shoulders. He couldn't keep his cry of delight from escaping his lips when it changed the angle of Gage's thrusts, his body taking the man deeper.

"Told you I'd fuck you into the mattress," Gage panted out as he pounded into Noah.

Noah nodded rapidly as he met Gage's intense gaze. He was beyond articulated speech at that moment, only soft moans and groans falling from his lips.

"Purr for me, baby."

Noah purred.

"I fucking love it when you purr," Gage groaned and started thrusting faster, his movements becoming more

uncoordinated with each plunge.

Noah decided he'd be doing a whole lot more purring in the future, especially if it got his ass pounded into the mattress. Of course, any flat surface would do. Noah wasn't particular and he hoped Gage wasn't either.

"Grab your cock, baby," Gage demanded between thrusts. "Stroke yourself off for me."

Noah was all too eager to comply with Gage's demand. He reached down between their bodies and grabbed his cock, stroking it furiously as Gage continued to pound into his ass. His breathing grew more ragged, the pressure in his body building to an explosive level.

"Gage," he whispered silently. *"Please."*

"Come for me, baby."

One simple command and the desire burning through Noah's body ignited. He cried out, his body jerking as he filled the space between them. So many sensations raced through his body that Noah thought he might actually die.

"Oh fuck, love," Gage groaned.

Noah looked up to see Gage stiffen, the corded muscles on his throat standing out vividly. Gage jerked once, twice, then thrust deeply inside of Noah's body. Noah groaned as he felt Gage's cock expand, filling him to the

brim as seed shot from the man's cock.

"Geez, what the fuck is that?" Gage exclaimed, his hazel eyes wide as he stared down at Noah in shock.

"It-it's a knot," Noah panted as Gage's cock continued to thicken and fill him. The head of Gage's cock expanded more, extending, pressing against the small walnut-sized gland inside of Noah's body. "It keeps your semen inside of me until my body absorbs it all. It's a way of furthering our bond."

"Does it hurt?"

"No!" Noah groaned. It felt fucking fantastic.

"Does it feel good?" Gage chuckled as he swiveled his hips.

Noah groaned and panted, nodding his head rapidly. He couldn't have spoken right then if his life depended on it. He'd just come moments before, and he was again on the verge of another mind-numbing climax.

If Gage would just move a little...

"Gage, please!" Noah pleaded, not above begging. Every time Gage moved, the thickened head rubbed against Noah's sweet spot, keeping him on the very edge. He knew if Gage would just move a little he could climax.

"What do you want, baby?" Gage asked as he swiveled his hips again.

"M-move, damn it."

"Swearing, Noah?" Gage chuckled. "What would your mother think?"

"Please!" Saying please when you wanted something was polite, wasn't it? Would it get Gage to move?

"No more denying me, Noah."

"No," Noah eagerly agreed. He couldn't deny Gage anymore. The man practically owned him now. Noah wasn't sure that was a good thing considering Gage basically just needed to wiggle his finger and he was willing to give the man anything.

"No more keeping things from me."

"No."

"No more thinking about dying."

"Gage."

"No more, Noah. I mean it. I'm tired of watching you willingly go to your death. From this moment on, you will fight to live, fight for us." Gage leaned down until they were almost nose to nose. "Is that understood, Noah?"

Noah could see the glint of stubbornness in Gage's eyes as the man stared down at him. Even though his body was burning with the need to come, the intensity of Gage's stare affected him more than anything. It had the ability to

make Noah's heart stutter in his chest.

"Gage," Noah whispered.

"Promise me, Noah, or this is over right now."

"I promise."

"Good kitty."

Noah's jaw dropped at Gage's words. He started to argue with the man that it wasn't appropriate to be called *kitty* when Gage rammed into him. Noah's eyes dropped closed as his orgasm instantly rolled through him.

He couldn't breathe. He couldn't talk. He couldn't even think. Everything in his body was melting into the mattress right beneath Gage's heavy weight as the man leaned down over him. Noah opened his eyes when he felt Gage's hand brush his cheek.

"A promise is a promise, baby."

Noah gulped. "You... you don't play fair."

The corner of Gage's lips curled up in a smirk. "I'm a killer, baby. I never play fair. I play to win."

CHAPTER 10

Gage couldn't help grinning as he watched Noah get dressed. The man was drop-dead gorgeous, and he had no idea. Gage was still stunned by everything he'd learned in the last hour. Noah was a huge surprise. Strangely, he was also a welcome surprise.

The more time Gage spent with Noah, the more he liked the man. The strangeness that enveloped Noah was becoming less strange with each passing minute. Mostly, because the feeling of rightness Gage felt when he was with Noah was becoming stronger.

"You're awfully quiet, kitten."

Noah swung around to glare at Gage, pointing his finger. "You've really got to stop calling me that."

"What? Kitten?" Gage chuckled as he stood and walked over to stand in front of Noah, drawing the man into his arms and against his chest. "But you are a kitten."

"It's not dignified," Noah insisted as he stomped his foot.

"Maybe, but it's cuter than hell and so are you."

"Really?"

Gage loved the small flush that filled Noah's face and the way the man peeked up at him. He knew Noah had

no idea of his appeal, but luckily, Gage did. Add in the fact that Noah's body had basically just dialed itself into his, and Gage was one happy camper.

Now he just had to figure out how to keep Noah alive because he wasn't going to allow the man to die. As far as Gage was concerned, Noah belonged to him now, period, and he'd fight anyone that tried to take the gorgeous little man from him.

"Hey, babe," Gage said as he stepped back and started pulling his clothes on, "this ruling the pride thing, is it something you want?"

"I don't know." Noah shrugged. "I've never really thought about it."

"Well, maybe you should."

"Why?"

"Why what?" Gage frowned when he tried to button his jeans and the flaps wouldn't come together. "Damn, I feel like I gained twenty pounds."

"You probably did." Noah laughed and pointed to Gage's feet. "You certainly grew taller."

Gage glanced down at his feet, shock running through him when he saw his pant legs up above his ankles. He looked up at Noah in surprise. "Just how much am I going to grow?"

"I have no idea. You'll grow until your body is where it should be to protect me."

"I can see a new wardrobe in my future," Gage mumbled as he pulled his shirt on over his head. "I look ridiculous."

"You look hot."

Gage rolled his eyes. He couldn't help it. His shirt barely came down to his bellybutton, and the sleeve seams were threatening to rip apart. His pants were way too short coming to just above his ankles and he couldn't button them at all. Despite Noah's assertion, Gage knew he looked absurd.

"As soon as we're done here, we're going to go buy me some new clothes."

"You might want to buy a few sizes. We won't know how large you'll get until you're done growing."

Gage arched an eyebrow. "I'm not done now?"

"Don't think so." Noah's eyes were filled with amusement.

Gage knew the amusement was at his expense, but he couldn't help but be happy at the sight of merriment in the man. Noah had been so morose and ready to accept death. The laughter in his voice was a refreshing change.

Gage tugged on the hem of his shirt, trying to get it

to go just a bit lower but to no avail. The shirt stayed right where it was, showing his bellybutton and everything. It just wasn't going to get any better until he had some new clothes.

"Alright, let's go."

"Um, Gage?"

"Yeah, babe?"

"Don't you think you should do something about that?" Noah asked as he pointed to the gap created where his pants came together. He hurried over to his closet and pulled out a sweatshirt. Noah closed the closet door and walked over to Gage, handing him the sweatshirt. "This might help, or at least hide some of," Noah waved his hand to the bare skin exposed between Gage's bellybutton and visible pubic hair, "you."

Gage chuckled as he tied the sleeves of the sweatshirt around his waist and knotted it. It did cover a good portion of his exposed body but not enough to make Gage comfortable. Still, there didn't seem to be any other option. He couldn't wait to see Dean's reaction. The man was going to laugh himself silly.

Gage shook his head and held out his hand to Noah. "Come on, love, let's go face the firing squad."

"Oh, maybe we shouldn't. We could sneak out the

bedroom window and—"

"Noah, I meant my friend, Dean. Not those other two guys. And that reminds me, just who exactly are those two men?"

"They are basically soldiers in the pride sent here on my uncle's behalf to kill me."

"Do they know you're the only house cat in existence?"

"I think so, but they have a sworn duty to their king, and until I am either dead or proclaimed king, Geraldo is their king. They must do as he orders."

Gage knew Noah was trying to sound reasonable, but it just made him see red. He grabbed Noah's wrist and started dragging him toward the bedroom door. He was going to give those two men a piece of his mind, and he might even let them live if they agreed to his terms.

Maybe.

Gage paused at the door to look down at Noah. "I want you to stay quiet when we go into the other room. Let me do the talking. I know how to handle these guys. If you need to say something to me, use that link thing between us, okay?"

Noah nodded. He looked nervous, agitated. Gage placed his hand under Noah's chin and raised the man's face

up. He leaned down and placed a small kiss on Noah's temple, grinning when Noah sighed and leaned into him. The purring started before Gage even pulled his head back.

"That purring thing is really hot."

Gage laughed when Noah's face flushed and he dipped his head.

"Come on, love, let's get this over with." Gage opened the bedroom door and stepped out, feeling the eyes of every man in the room turn in his direction. He reached back and grabbed Noah's arm and pulled the man up close to his backside.

"Have fun?" Dean asked casually from where he leaned up against the kitchen wall, the gun in his hand pointed to the two men sitting on the floor against the bookshelves.

"As a matter of fact, yes I did."

Gage pulled Noah out of the bedroom and escorted him to the opposite side of the room from the two men sent to kill him. He pushed him into the armchair by the window then turned to face the two men.

"Leave Noah alone." Gage crossed his arms over his chest and glared at the two men. "That is your only option if you want to leave here alive."

"This is not your business," one of the men snapped

out, the one with dark hair. It was pretty much the only way Gage could tell the difference between the two men. They were both dressed in black, about the same height and weight. Even their faces looked similar. They might have been related. Only the difference in their hair color, one dark, one light, told them apart.

"It is very much my business. Noah belongs to me, and I protect what is mine."

"You are the one he mated?" the other man asked, the light-haired one.

"I am."

"But, you're human."

"That is true also, but it does not negate the fact that you are not going to hurt a hair on Noah's head. He's mine to protect now, and I will. Just try me."

"He has to die," the dark-haired man said sharply. "It has been ordered by our king."

"Noah is your king."

"Dude!"

Gage ignored Dean's outburst and continued to glare at the two men. "You know he is your king, and yet you are still trying to kill him. I wonder why."

"He is not the true king," the dark-haired man shouted. "He is an imposter."

"What is your name?" Gage asked to the light-haired man, ignoring the other one. He didn't think he had much to say to him.

"I am called Braden." He waved his hand toward the man sitting next to him. "This is my cousin, Jonas. We are both in service to our king."

Gage walked over and squatted down in front of Braden, regarding the man thoughtfully. "Noah is your rightful king. Why are you trying to kill him? Shouldn't your allegiance be to him?"

"He is not our king!" Jonas insisted.

Gage spared Jonas a quick scathing glare before looking back at Braden. "Is that how you feel as well?"

"I do not know. I have been taught from birth to follow the orders of my king, and he has ordered Noah's death. It goes against everything I believe in to not fulfill my king's demands."

"Even if those demands are wrong?" Gage asked. "Even if the man giving the orders is not the true king?"

"King Geraldo has been on the throne since before I was alive," Braden said. "How can you say he is not our king?"

"Because he's not. Noah is. Why do you think Geraldo wants Noah dead? I suspect he doesn't want to

give up his throne now that Noah can prove he is the rightful king."

"You're lying!" Jonas snapped. "King Geraldo is our king, our true king."

"Can he shift into a cat, a house cat?" Gage asked.

"No one can," Jonas replied, his fists clenching as he glared at Gage. "Everyone knows that the true line of kings died over twenty five years ago. King Geraldo is the closest thing we have to a royal line. It is his right to rule."

"Noah, love, would you be so kind as to show these men your true form?"

"Really?" Noah asked. *"You want me to shift?"*

Gage smiled as he glanced over his shoulder at Noah. "I think it's the only way they will believe us, babe."

Noah rolled his eyes right before closing them. Gage watched in fascination as the light around Noah shimmered for a moment, and then where a man had been now sat a pure white house cat with deep emerald green eyes.

"No!" Jonas shouted.

Gage swung back just in time to see Jonas leap to his feet and jump across the room toward Noah. He reached out and grabbed the man around the legs, tackling him to the floor just inches from Noah.

"What the hell?" Gage heard Dean shout in the background.

Gage's heart thundered as he watched Noah crouch down in the chair, the hair on the back of the cat-man standing up as he hissed and growled loudly. Jonas growled right back and tried to claw his way across the floor closer to Noah.

Gage tightened his hold around Jonas's legs, but he could feel the man slipping away from him. He couldn't allow Jonas to reach Noah. He'd promised the little man that he would keep him safe. Gage started clawing at Jonas, trying to drag him away from Noah. He wondered why Dean didn't jump in and help until he turned and saw Dean holding a gun on Braden's tense form, keeping him out of the fight.

Gage felt a renewed energy strike him when Noah flicked out his claws and scratched Jonas across the face. He expected Jonas to strike back and even tensed as he waited for the man to hit Noah.

Instead, Jonas cried out and sank to the floor, his head cradled in his hands. Confused by the sudden lack of fight in Jonas, Gage continued to hold onto him. He tilted his head up to look at Noah, looking for any injuries.

"Noah, are you okay, love?"

"Yes, I'm fine. He didn't touch me."

"Shift back, baby."

In the blink of an eye, Noah was back to human form, even if he was still hunched down, his knees drawn up to his chest as he watched Jonas warily. Slowly, Gage loosened his hold, watching Jonas to insure the man didn't move.

He sat up and scooted up to place himself between Jonas and Noah then reached a hand back to touch his mate, wanting to assure himself that the man was not hurt.

"Are you sure you're not hurt?"

"I'm good."

Gage wanted to look at Noah, to see for himself, but he hesitated to take his eyes off of Jonas. He didn't know what game the man was playing, but Gage wanted to be ready for anything. However, he was greatly relieved when he felt Noah's body press up against his back, the man's arms encircling his neck as a small kiss was placed on his cheek.

"I promise, I'm fine, totally untouched."

When Jonas started to move, lifting his head at first then climbing to kneel, Gage tensed. "Touch Noah and you will die," he warned the man.

To his surprise, Jonas merely nodded then his head

dropped down nearly to his chest. "I apologize, Your Highness. I have no excuse for my actions. I await your punishment."

What the fuck? Gage thought as he watched the man lean forward until his forehead touched the floor. "Noah? What just happened?"

"You're asking me?"

"Jonas knows he was wrong. Geraldo is not our true king. You are."

Gage looked beyond Jonas to where Braden still leaned against the bookshelf. He was surprised to see tears sparkling in Braden's eyes. "And that means what? I've been saying Noah is the true king this entire time."

"Geraldo has ruled for twenty-five years. Everyone believes the royal line died out, that there are no more true blood royals. It's what we are taught from birth."

"If you believe that then why did you keep calling me *your highness* when you arrived?"

Braden's smirk was sad. "We had been told that you were an imposter, some lost relative of Geraldo's. Being a relative, even if you were not one of the true blood, it still made you a royal member of the pride. We were told to treat you as such."

Noah snorted. "Well, at least Geraldo has some

manners."

"You are far kinder than I would be, Your Highness," Braden said, "especially considering the situation."

Gage couldn't agree more. He still didn't know if he was going to kill Braden and Jonas or not. He definitely had plans to kill Geraldo if he ever saw the man. Gage stood up, keeping his eyes on Jonas. He still didn't trust the man.

"Go sit back over with your cousin, Jonas."

The man didn't move beyond the tensing of his muscles.

Gage rolled his eyes and glanced back at Noah, waving his hand at the prone man on the floor. "Would you mind?"

"Do as he says, Jonas," Noah said quietly, although Gage could hear the confusion in his voice. "You are to follow any command that Gage gives. He speaks for me at all times."

Jonas pushed himself back to his knees and nodded, then climbed to his feet and walked back over to the opposite side of the room. Gage waited until Jonas sat down again and Dean held the gun on both men before turning to lift Noah into his arms.

He sat down and settled Noah on his lap, in no way surprised when Noah snuggled in and started purring. Gage stroked his hand through Noah's hair and down his back as he looked across at the two soldiers sent to kill the man in his arms.

"What do you suggest I do with the two of you?" Gage asked. "You've tried to kill not only my mate but your king, your true king. Even if you are following the orders of a man you thought to be your king, you are still men, able to think for yourself."

"Truthfully?" Braden asked. "For what we've done, we deserve to die."

"I agree." Gage felt Noah tense in his arms, and the purring stopped. "However, my Noah does not like bloodshed. It messes up his floors."

The purring started again so Gage knew he'd given the correct response. It wasn't one he would have given twenty-four hours ago, and that amused him in a way. So much had changed in his life in such a small amount of time. He no longer thought in terms of eliminating any known threat. He thought of what Noah would want first.

Gage couldn't say he was sad to see it happen either. Surprised, yes, sad, no. He'd spent too many years being all alone, having no one permanent in his life. One night

stands and back alley hook-ups didn't satisfy him like simply holding Noah in his arms did. Noah made Gage feel special, like he mattered to someone. Gage couldn't remember if he had ever had that before.

Even the men he worked with, beyond feeling a small amount of sadness at his loss, wouldn't mourn if he died. He was a killer, a tool to be used. He'd been trained that way from an early age. With Noah, Gage knew that he would be missed, even mourned. Hell, Gage was pretty sure that Noah would be devastated.

"So, what am I supposed to do with you?" Gage asked. "If I kill you, Noah will be upset. If I let you go, you might come back and try to hurt Noah, in which case I would be upset and I would still have to kill you. I'm not finding an easy solution here."

"If I kill them then Noah can't be mad at you," Dean added in.

"Yeah, but he'd be mad at you."

"Aw, I can take the little guy." Dean smirked.

Gage knew Dean was joking. Dean had a wicked sense of humor. But Noah didn't know that, and Gage felt the man tense in his arms. Gage started stroking his hand in small circles at the base of Noah's back as he looked over at his friend.

"That might be but you still have to deal with Noah for calling him a pussy cat."

Gage watched with a great deal of amusement as Dean's mouth dropped open at the little secret he let out. Noah's head snapped up. The glare he sent Dean would have made lesser men shake in their boots.

"You called me a pussy cat?"

"Oh, come on, it wasn't personal." Dean waved his hand wildly. "You are a pussy cat."

"I'm a cat."

"Cat, pussy cat, what's the difference?"

Noah shifted and leapt across the floor before Gage could stop him. Dean shouted and struggled to get away as Noah ran right up the front of his pants and shirt, his nails digging into the thick fabric. Noah took one swipe at Dean's face then jumped down onto the counter.

He crouched down and hissed at Dean, growling low in his throat as his emerald green eyes glared at Dean. Covering his bleeding cheek with his hand, Dean slowly backed away from Noah.

Gage jumped to his feet after the shock faded and walked over to pick Noah up in his arms. He grimaced as he shook his head at Dean. He walked back over to sit down with Noah in his lap, running his hands gently

through Noah's soft fur.

"Still think you can take him?" Gage arched an eyebrow as he looked across at his friend.

"Dude, your cat is crazy." Dean rubbed his cheek then stared down at the blood on his hand in horror. "Am I like, going to turn into a cat now or something?"

"Doesn't happen that way," Braden said from his position on the floor. "If every person we scratched turned into a cat, the world would be overrun."

"Have you seen the stray cat population?" Dean asked. "Are you sure we're not being overrun?"

"Only a true blood from the direct royal line can shift into a house cat. That's how we know they are the true royals. Everyone else has a different form."

Dean frowned, his forehead wrinkling. Gage felt as confused as Dean looked. "What do you shift into?" Gage asked.

The light around Braden shimmered and flashed. Gage blinked at the bright light. When his vision cleared, his mouth dropped open and his grip on Noah tightened as he found himself looking at a five hundred pound Siberian tiger.

"Fuck!"

Gage nodded, silently agreeing with Dean. Things

were just getting more and more interesting. Noah said he would be able to take on a full grown tiger when he finally got to his new size. If that was the case, and in face of the cat he was currently looking at, Gage was pretty sure he was going to be as big as a house.

"Shift back," Gage ordered, uncomfortable with Braden being in his shifted form while Noah was in the room. According to Noah, Gage wasn't done growing and that meant he couldn't adequately protect his lover right now.

Gage expected to have to get Noah to help him or at least order the man to follow Gage's words. He was a little surprised when Braden simply followed his order and shifted back in the blink of a blinding light. Once again, a man dressed in black clothing sat on the floor in front of the bookshelf.

"Noah, love, why don't you shift back as well?" Gage had no more spoken the words than he found himself with a lap full of man instead of feline. He almost groaned when Noah cuddled in and started purring, both actions making his cock hard.

Gage tried to keep his attention on the conversation but was quickly losing his train of thought when Noah wiggled a bit and tried to get more comfortable. He could

feel Noah's ass rubbing against him and the purring wasn't helping a bit. It was like a mating call to his dick.

"Behave, kitten," he whispered into Noah's ear as he patted his hip. Noah's giggle was delightful and filled with joy. The pleasure that shot through Gage's body at the soft sound was almost better than sex, almost. It made any discomfort Gage felt worth it.

Gage regretfully took his attention away from Noah and turned it back to the two men across the room. He could see both men watching him curiously and imagined they didn't know quite what to make of him and Noah.

He could even see Dean watching him out of the corner of his eyes, a deep frown on his face. Having never seen him behave in this manner, Gage imagined Dean was very confused. Gage almost smiled.

"Braden, what do you suggest I do with you and your cousin?"

"We deserve death for what we've done," Braden said, repeating what he had said before.

That was simple enough, but Gage knew Noah didn't like that idea when the man stiffened in his arms again. Gage sighed, knowing he'd have to get used to not killing someone when they became a threat. He'd have to find other ways to solve his problems because Noah didn't

like the idea of killing. Gage had to wonder what cosmic being was laughing at his expense right now.

"That's not good enough," Gage finally said.

"Killing you will not solve the problem of Noah's uncle trying to kill him. If not you two, then he will send someone else to finish the job, and I won't have Noah looking over his shoulder for the rest of his life."

"He has given me my life, even after I sought to take his," Jonas whispered, looking down at the floor.

"What life I now have belongs to him, and I will protect him until my last breath."

"As will I," Braden added. His gaze was intense, powerful, holding something akin to adoration in its blue depths as he looked across at Noah. "He is our true king."

CHAPTER 11

Noah stroked his fingers through Precious' fur as he listened to Gage, Dean, Braden, and Jonas talk. He was tired and getting frustrated. He felt prickly and out of sorts. After Precious had been taken care of, and everyone got a good night's sleep, they had all congregated back in the living room to discuss what Noah should do. They'd been talking ever since Dean came back with new clothes for Gage.

Each one of them had an opinion on what they thought Noah should do in regards to his uncle. None of them asked Noah what he wanted, not even Gage. Braden and Jonas thought Noah should take the throne. Gage vetoed any idea that might put Noah in danger. And Dean just seemed to think they were all nuts.

Braden and Jonas were now sitting on the couch facing Noah and Gage. Dean still sat at the kitchen counter. Glasses sat on bare wood on the coffee table, no coaster used. Noah just knew they were leaving rings. Dean hadn't even cleaned up his dishes after he ate, just left them sitting on the counter. Everything was out of place.

It made Noah's teeth ache.

Noah growled low in his throat and jumped to his

feet, setting Precious in the chair. He stalked across the room and grabbed the stack of coasters on the coffee table. Silence filled the room as he picked up each glass and placed a coaster under it.

Once he was done, Noah grabbed the remaining dishes and carried them into the kitchen. He started rinsing them off and stacking them in the dishwasher, his movements tight and brisk. It was better than yelling. His mother taught him never to yell in anger. It only made the situation worse. Noah needed to wait until he calmed down before he talked to anyone.

"Noah, are you okay?"

Noah nodded when he heard Gage's words, pressing his lips together to keep from saying anything. He finished washing the last plate and placed it in the dishwasher before adding soap then closing the door. A flick of his wrist and the dishwasher came to life.

Noah heaved a small sigh of relief at having that done then reached for a clean washcloth and some soap. He still needed to clean up the kitchen from the mess made when lunch was cooked. Noah shook his head, not understanding why people didn't clean up while they cooked. It just made sense, less work and less mess.

"Noah, love, what's wrong?"

Noah shuddered, feeling Gage's breath blow across the back of his neck. Strong arms reached around him and pulled him back against a solid chest. Noah resisted the hug for just a moment before leaning back into Gage's body.

"Tell me, love."

"It's so messy." Noah prayed he didn't sound whiny. He just couldn't stand messy. It wrecked his entire world. If things were organized, he could think, deal, cope. Messy made him feel... messy.

"And it's making you feel frazzled, isn't it?"

Noah nodded

"Tell you what, love, we can order out for dinner and then there wouldn't be a mess to clean up in here. And you can get into the shower and some nice clean clothes. I'll bet that would make you feel better, huh?"

"Oh yes, please," Noah groaned at the thought of taking a shower. He was sure he was dirty. He clothes certainly felt that way. A clean body and clean clothes would make him feel so much better. It would be even better if Gage could join him. He turned to look back at Gage. "Do you need a shower too?"

"Yeah." Gage grinned. "I suppose I do."

Noah's breath caught in his throat. He quickly folded the washcloth and set it on the counter before

turning Gage's arms. "I guess I could clean up the kitchen afterwards."

"Or you could have Dean do it. It was his mess."

Noah chuckled. "I like the way you think."

Noah grabbed Gage's hand and started out of the kitchen. He pointed at Dean the moment he saw him. "You have a mess to clean up in the kitchen. Get to it."

Noah ignored the knowing grins from Braden, Jonas, and Dean and pulled Gage into the bedroom. He walked straight past the bed and right into the bathroom. The moment he stepped into the bathroom, Noah turned to face Gage. He could see a little smirk on the man's face as he reached for the buttons of his shirt. Noah wanted Gage naked and in the shower more than he wanted to take his next breath.

Button by button, Gage's magnificent chest was revealed to Noah's hungry gaze. Noah pushed the edges of the shirt up Gage's shoulders as much as possible, but it was hard considering the man was so much taller than he was. Gage helped by shrugging his shoulders until the shirt slid off and fell to the floor.

Noah inhaled deeply when he got a good look at the impressive naked chest in front of him. He stroked his hands slowly down the smooth muscles, giggling when

Gage flexed his pectoral muscles. They looked like they were dancing.

Noah wanted to stay right where he was, exploring the tight expanse of muscles, but the hard bulge just below Gage's waist caught his attention. He bit his lip as he gazed up at Gage and moved his hands down to the edge of Gage's pants.

The sensuous smile on Gage's lips, along with the desire burning in the man's eyes, gave Noah courage. He unzipped Gage's pants then reached for the two edges, pulling them apart until the man's hard cock bounced up. His eyes nearly crossed at the gorgeous thick shaft that stood up from Gage's groin.

Noah tried to keep from drooling as he dropped to his knees and started pulling Gage's shoes off. It wasn't easy. Gage's cock stood right in front of his face, so close, so thick. Noah groaned and turned his eyes away from Gage's cock to help the man off with his pants.

Once Gage stood before him totally naked, Noah leaned back on his knees and looked at the man. He started at his feet and slowly moved up Gage's body, past strong calves and thick muscular thighs. He took in each slick muscle, each dip and ridge, each rippled plane.

The breath Noah drew into his lungs was ragged

and barely able to feed his lungs. He felt like every bit of air was being forced, like he couldn't breathe, but Noah couldn't drag his eyes away from the beautiful man before him.

"Are you going to just sit there and look at me, kitten, or get undressed?"

"I think I'll just sit here and look."

Gage laughed, drawing Noah's eyes to his face. Noah eagerly grabbed the hands Gage held out to him because he wanted to be pressed against the man's luscious body more than anything he could think of at the moment.

It might be even more important than breathing.

"Gage," Noah whispered as he pressed his face against the man's sternum and inhaled deeply. The strong scent of man and arousal swept through him, burning itself into Noah's memory, integrating with Noah's cells and telling his body it was about to be claimed. Noah knew no matter where they went he'd always be able to find Gage just by his scent alone.

"Let's get you undressed and into the shower, Noah. We can play there."

Noah was all for that. He started yanking his shirt over his head before Gage even stopped talking. His pants and underwear followed moments later until he stood as

naked as Gage.

Noah had no idea where his bravado came from as he crooked his finger at Gage and backed into the shower. He just knew he needed to get his hands on Gage's hot body as fast as he could. Gage cocked an eyebrow at Noah, but the grin that crossed his lips told Noah he'd made the right choice of actions.

Noah turned on the water and waited for it to warm up before he stepped under the spray. He groaned and tilted his head back as the water ran down his body. Noah knew being a clean freak was a little strange, but he always felt better after getting clean. To him, it was like cleaning away everything so he could deal with whatever came next.

"You know that sound is almost as hot as you purring, right?" Gage chuckled into Noah's ear as he brought their bodies together. Noah grinned and leaned back against Gage, his head resting on the man's wide chest.

"Like that, do you?"

"I do."

Noah groaned as Gage's hands began to roam over his chest. Each caress made Noah's toes curl, his skin tingle. He wanted Gage to touch him everywhere. "I guess that's one way to hear more."

"Oh, I have better ways than this."

"Better?" Noah choked out. He looked up at Gage, eager to know what the man meant. "There's something better than this?"

"Oh yeah."

Noah groaned and turned to push closer to Gage, giving himself up to the passion racing through him as Gage's hands roamed over his body. The man seemed to be trying to touch every inch of Noah's body. Noah was all for that.

His body ached, and not just the hard shaft he could feel pressing against Gage as if begging for attention. Every nerve was tingling as if anticipating Gage's next arousing touch. When Gage's hands suddenly grabbed his ass and lifted him into the air, Noah eagerly wrapped his legs around the man's waist.

Noah almost came when their cocks slammed together. Only by clenching his hands into fists and burying his face in Gage's neck was he able to hold off his impending orgasm. He could feel Gage's chest rising and falling rapidly and knew the man was in the same position as he was. That at least gave Noah some satisfaction.

It also gave him an idea.

Noah grabbed two large handfuls of Gage's hair and

tilted the man's head back just enough to get to his throat. He started licking and nibbling along the corded muscles, the salty taste of the man's skin exploding across his tongue.

"Do you remember what I said before?" Noah whispered as he licked his way up to Gage's ear. "My body now answers only to you, Gage. A drop of your semen and my body will prepare itself for you, for your possession."

Gage's hands tightened on Noah's ass cheeks, and his entire body shuddered as the man groaned. "You really need to watch what you say, baby. I'm hanging on by a thread here."

"You can take me anytime you want. My body belongs to you."

"I won't do anything that hurts you, Noah."

Noah tilted his head back so that he could look into Gage's eyes. He could see the concern there warring with Gage's need to claim him. Noah smiled and cupped Gage's face in his hands.

"Trust me."

Gage looked hesitant but finally nodded. He gently pressed Noah against the wall. Noah grabbed onto Gage's shoulders as he felt the man reach down beneath his ass. A moment later, the head of Gage's cock pushed up against

his tight entrance.

Gage's eyes flew to his.

"Just wait. It'll happen. It just takes a moment for my body to recognize yours." Noah's breath caught in his throat as he felt his body start to open up to Gage. "S-see, there... there you go."

Noah's groan was just barely overshadowed by Gage's as the man suddenly started to slide into him. Noah could feel Gage's muscles tense under his hands. He knew Gage wanted nothing more than to thrust deeply, but he held off for Noah's sake.

The moment he felt he could take all of Gage's hard length, Noah gripped the man's shoulders tightly with his hands and flexed his leg muscles. "Now, Gage, take me now."

Noah's cry of delight filled the room as Gage rammed home, filling him to the brim. The grip Gage had on his ass told Noah he'd probably have bruises in the morning. He couldn't have cared less. He wanted everything Gage had to give him.

Noah breathed in deep, soul-drenching drafts of air as Gage began a relentless pace, pounding into him. Noah gloried in every deep thrust, every stroke of Gage's cock against his sweet spot.

Slowly, Noah's hands slid over Gage's shoulders to curl in the hair at the nape of the man's neck. He tilted Gage's head back and leaned in to suck on the strong corded muscles of his throat. Elation filled him when Gage's thrusts became erratic, the man's deep moans filling the shower stall.

Waves of ecstasy throbbed through his body. Noah cried out, his groan of release filling the shower stall just as wet heat filled the space between them. His head fell back against the tiled wall as Gage pounded into him a few more times.

Gage's body suddenly stiffened. Noah cried out again as the cock in his ass expanded, the knot taking form inside of him as Gage shot spurt after spurt of seed into him.

Noah's body melted against Gage, and the world narrowed to be filled with only him. Noah could feel Gage's chest moving up and down, feel the man's hot breath brush across his neck. He could hear the little pants the man made, as if all of the air had been sucked out of his lungs and he was desperate to breathe.

Noah slowly stroked his hand through Gage's hair and started purring, knowing Gage liked to hear the soft sound. Gage said the sound aroused him but maybe it was

also a comforting sound for Gage.

When Gage finally lifted his head to look down into Noah's eyes, he had a peaceful, serene look to him. The lines of tension that had been present previously had smoothed out to be replaced by a relaxed smile.

"Feel better, kitten?" Gage asked as he smoothed the wet hair back from Noah's face.

"Yeah." Noah grinned.

"Me too."

Noah groaned in protest as Gage pulled away from him. His legs shook, almost collapsing under him. Noah grabbed onto Gage at the same moment he felt the man's strong arms wrap around him. Noah felt his face flush as he looked up at Gage.

"Guess I'm more tired than I thought."

"You've had a very eventful few days," Gage said.

"It's no wonder you're tired."

"I suppose, but it's not been any more eventful than yours."

"True, but I'm used to eventful. You're not."

Noah frowned. He didn't like the sound of that. If Gage was used to having an eventful life, how would anything Noah did compare? Noah's breath caught in his throat as he suddenly wondered if he would be able to

make Gage happy enough to stick around.

What did he know about pleasing a man? What did he know about pleasing anyone? Besides his mother, who passed away ages ago, Noah never really had anyone in his life. He was all alone, or he would be if Gage decided life with Noah was too boring.

"I need to wash my hair," Noah whispered.

"Would you like me to do it for you?"

"Uh... yeah, I guess." Noah couldn't keep the confusion out of his voice as he turned around to face the shower wall. He'd never had anyone ask to wash his hair before, at least not that he could remember.

Noah was so caught up in his thoughts that he almost jumped when he felt Gage's hands sink into his hair. One stroke of Gage's fingers against his scalp, and Noah couldn't prevent himself from purring. He'd never felt anything so good in his life outside of sex. He didn't even know it was possible to feel this good outside of sex.

"You like that, kitten?" Gage murmured.

Noah nodded, beyond speaking at that point, especially when Gage's fingers reached his ears and scratched behind them. If he'd been a puppy shifter, his leg would have been thumping. Noah thanked the powers that be that he was a cat shifter instead. He didn't want to look

like more of a goober than he already did.

"Okay, head back."

Noah tilted his head back and closed his eyes. He felt Gage's fingers slide through his hair removing the shampoo as hot water rushed down on him. Noah couldn't stop purring. It all felt too good. He was getting clean and by the sexiest man on the planet. Was there anything better in the world?

"So, I haven't heard your opinion yet, Noah," Gage said. "What would you like to do?"

Noah's little bubble burst. He grimaced and pulled his head out from under the shower spray to turn and look back up at Gage. "What do you mean?"

Gage smirked. "You know exactly what I mean."

Noah sighed deeply and reached to turn the water off. He ignored the arched eyebrow on Gage's face and stepped out of the shower, grabbing a towel off the towel shelf as he went. Noah wrapped the towel around his waist and reached for another one to dry off his hair and the rest of his body.

As much as he wanted to be asked that question and have his opinion count, Noah wasn't sure what he wanted beyond keeping Gage. He just couldn't seem to get his mind past the possibility of losing Gage.

Noah tossed the towel in the hamper along with his dirty clothes. He'd reached for Gage's clothes and started to toss them as well when he suddenly realized what he was doing. Noah turned to look at Gage, only to find the man grinning at him.

"My clothes need to be washed too, Noah. Besides, Dean went out this morning and bought me some new ones so I'm good to go."

Noah smiled, feeling greatly relieved, and tossed Gage's clothes in the hamper along with his own. He stared down at the pile for a moment, realizing that for the first time since he could remember, his clothes were piled together with someone else's. It was a good feeling that swept through Noah, not being alone after so many years.

"Noah? You didn't answer my question."

Poof, there went his bubble again.

Noah turned and leaned back against the bathroom counter as he looked across the bathroom at the man. He tried to choose his words carefully. He didn't want to upset Gage or say anything that might drive the man away, but he really had no clue what he wanted.

"I don't know."

"You don't know what, babe?"

"I don't know what I want to do."

"Do you want to be king?"

Noah snorted and shook his head. "Not really."

"Okay." Gage chuckled. "I guess that's plain enough."

"I'm not king material, Gage, seriously. I'd just fuck it up somehow."

"I don't believe that, Noah. I think if you chose to take up the mantle of leadership, you'd make a wonderful king."

"Yeah?" Noah whispered as his face heated up. He crossed his arms over his chest to keep from fidgeting because he knew it was coming. He could feel his nervousness climbing as Gage stared at him. "Do you want me to be king?"

"I think that decision needs to be up to you, Noah."

"Why?" Noah frowned as another thought hit him. "Shouldn't this decision involve the both of us or don't you want..." Noah snapped his mouth closed when he realized he was starting to sound whiny again.

Noah knew he'd have to make this decision on his own if he wanted to keep Gage. Gage was used to being only responsible for himself. He wouldn't want someone as needy as Noah felt right at that moment in his life. Noah took a deep breath and nodded.

"If you think I can be a good king then that's what I'll do." Even if he hated every moment of it.

"Is that what you want?"

Why does Gage keep asking these questions? Noah wondered. No matter what reply he gave the man, the questions kept coming as if Gage wasn't satisfied with the answers, except, Noah didn't know what the right answer was.

Noah felt like every frazzled nerve he had was starting to unravel. He pushed his hands behind his back to keep Gage from seeing him clench them into fists. He lowered his gaze in confusion when Gage just continued to stare at him, waiting.

"What would you like me to say, Gage?"

"The truth would be helpful."

Noah's head snapped up. "Would it?"

"Noah!"

Gage seemed shocked by Noah's hastily spoken words, and Noah didn't understand that. He didn't understand any of this, and it made him feel like Gage was slipping away from him with every passing second.

Noah sank down to the floor and rubbed his hands over his face before resting them on his knees. He gazed across at Gage, trying to gauge his reaction. Nothing

showed on the man's face, and Noah had to wonder if that was due to his profession or just the way the man was.

"I'll do whatever you think is best," Noah finally said.

"That's not going to cut it, Noah." Gage slid down the wall to sit on the floor across from Noah. "I want to know how you feel, what you want."

"No, you don't."

Noah was surprised to see Gage actually gape at him, the man's mouth dropping open briefly before he snapped it shut. Noah tensed, not sure what to expect. Gage looked angry. His jaw was tense as if he were grinding his teeth together.

"If I didn't want to know what you think, I wouldn't have asked, Noah."

"But you did ask and I gave you my answer then you asked again like I gave you the wrong answer. So, I gave you a different answer and you still keep asking." Noah flicked his hand into the air to make his point. "I don't know what you want me to say, Gage. Tell me and I'll say it."

Noah could swear Gage blinked at him oddly right before he jumped to his feet. Gage stalked over to the door, pausing for a moment with his hand on the doorframe. He

looked back over his shoulder at Noah with a withering glare.

"Let me know when you figure out what you want, Noah."

Noah watched as Gage walked out of the bathroom. He heard a bit of rustling then a moment later, the bedroom door opened and closed. Noah sat there for a moment, not sure what exactly just happened, when he heard the front door slam shut.

Noah winced as the noise seemed to fill the entire apartment. His heart beating faster and faster, Noah climbed to his feet and walked out of the bathroom. He wasn't in the least bit surprised to find the bedroom empty.

Feeling like he was walking in a fog, Noah walked over to the bedroom door and pulled it open. Somehow he wasn't surprised to see Braden and Jonas sitting in the living room, but beyond that, the room was vacant of anyone else except Precious, who was curled up in Braden's lap.

"Did Gage and Dean leave?"

"Yes," Braden answered, but Noah knew what he would say before he said it. The silence that filled the living room spoke for itself. Gage was gone. Apparently, Noah hadn't given him the answer he wanted.

Noah nodded and turned to quietly shut the door behind him. Noah didn't know if he was in a state of shock or what because he didn't seem to feel anything.

He walked over to his dresser and pulled out a clean pair of sweats and a shirt. He pulled them on then carried his towel to the dirty clothes hamper in the bathroom. It took just a few minutes to clean up the bathroom, which left Noah with nothing to do.

He wasn't tired or energetic. He wasn't sad or happy. He wasn't really anything. He just felt numb. Noah walked over to sit on the cushioned window seat, curling up with his knees to his chest and his arms wrapped around his shins.

Noah rested his chin on his knees and stared out the window. He could see the multitude of cats milling about outside, some sitting in the trees by the street, others on the steps or near the hubcaps of cars. None of them looked like they had any intention of leaving anytime soon.

Noah had to wonder why he was cursed to be the last true blood king. It was costing him everything good in his life. People wanted him dead. His carefully organized home had been invaded. A zillion cats slept outside his apartment building. And most importantly, Gage had left.

A small sob escaped Noah's throat. He smothered it

by pressing his lips together as tightly as he could. His mother had always told him there was no sense in crying over spilt milk. Noah had never really understood that statement until now, or how ridiculous it sounded.

Gage was gone, and there was nothing Noah could do about it. He'd made his decision. Noah had to accept that. He couldn't force Gage to want him or care about him. Forced love wasn't really true love. Letting Gage go was his only choice.

With that knowledge firmly in his mind, Noah reached over and opened the bedroom window as quietly as he could. Cool evening air rushed in bringing up goose bumps on Noah's arm. Noah inhaled the air, the scent of the city filling his senses and making his nose wrinkle in distaste. It smelled dirty and musty, but it was where he lived. He'd have to accept that.

With one last look around his bedroom, Noah shifted into his cat form and jumped up onto the windowsill. The ground looked too far away to jump down to, but the tree a few feet from his window didn't.

Noah took a deep breath and jumped, reaching out for the tree with his paws. He barely caught the bark with his claws and had to scramble to keep from falling. Once he found purchase on a tree limb, Noah went about finding a

nice quiet section to curl up in. Three limbs up and Noah found a small hollowed out area between the tree trunk and a large limb.

He hunkered down as far as he could and closed his eyes, hoping the previous few days would just fade away like they never happened. He'd miss the time with Gage, but at least he wouldn't feel this deep aching wound where his heart used to be.

Maybe he'd just stay a cat forever.

CHAPTER 12

"So, what has your panties in a bunch?"

"What do you mean?" Gage asked as he glanced over at Dean.

"Dude." Dean snorted. "If you were any more wound up, you'd be in traction."

Gage rolled his eyes and pushed his hands into the pockets of his jeans as he walked. "I'm fine."

"Right, and I'm the Easter Bunny."

"Just drop it, Dean," Gage snapped, turning to glare at his friend.

"Alright, alright," Dean replied, holding up his hands. "I'm just saying, if there's something you need to talk about, I'm here."

"I know." And he did. Out of all of the men he worked with at the agency, Dean always had his back, no matter what the situation. He was the one man Gage could count on if things went sour.

At least until Noah came along. Gage knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he could trust Noah. He just didn't know *how* he knew that. The connection between him and Noah went beyond anything Gage had ever experienced, and he didn't know quite what to make of it.

"Noah and I had a fight," Gage said as he watched his feet step down on the cement sidewalk, one foot at a time.

"I figured as much."

"It was stupid."

"It usually is."

Gage swung up to look at Dean. "When in the hell did you become such a relationship expert?"

"I'm a man of many talents." Dean grinned. "So, come on, dude, tell me what happened."

"It really was stupid," Gage groaned. "All during our conversation with Braden and Jonas, not once did anyone ask Noah what he wanted. Oh sure, everyone had ideas, but no one asked him how he felt about things. Not even me."

"And?"

"And..." Gage shrugged. "So, I asked him."

"From the way you're frowning I take it things didn't go so well?"

Gage wasn't sure of the answer to that question. Something had happened between him and Noah. Gage just wasn't sure what that was. He felt like the man was holding something back, but he'd felt that with Noah before. What he discovered when he dug deeper changed the way Gage

thought about the world, and pretty much every damn thing in his life.

He was pretty sure he was about to find the same thing happening to him again except he wasn't sure he was ready for any new surprises. Once in a twenty-four hour period was enough for Gage.

"Noah wouldn't give me a straight answer when I asked him what he wanted." Gage frowned as he shrugged a little. "It was like he was afraid to say what he really thought."

"Maybe he was," Dean said. "You can be a pretty intimidating guy, you know. If he thought you might get upset with his answer maybe he tried to give you the one he thought you wanted to hear. I hate to say this, Gage, but Noah doesn't strike me as the strong-willed type."

"Then you don't know Noah very well. He's one of the strongest men I've ever met." Gage sat up straighter in his seat as he thought about the little man, his enthusiasm for the conversation growing. "Imagine going through what he has in his life and coming out of it with his sanity intact. A weak man couldn't have done that."

"So, if he wasn't afraid you wouldn't like his answer, what else could it have been?" Dean asked. "Was it something you said, something you did? I mean, how much

do you really know about cat shifters? Maybe there's some protocol that you broke or something."

Gage had to think about that one. Dean was right. He didn't know much about cat shifters. What he knew, he learned from Noah, and Noah didn't seem to know that much about being a cat either. That left them both in the dark, but at least that left them in the dark together.

"I don't think he wants to be king," Gage finally said after thinking over his conversation with Noah in the bathroom.

"So, what says he has to? If he doesn't want to be king, he doesn't have to be king. There's no one forcing it on him." Dean frowned. "Unless you want him to be king?"

"I couldn't really care less as long as Noah is safe. If he wants to be king of his pride, fine. I'll go with him and keep him safe. If he wants to stay here and be a house cat, I'll deal with that too. I just want Noah to be safe and happy and preferably with me."

"Have you told him this?"

Gage blinked for a moment, stunned by Dean's words, then he started swearing up a blue streak as he bunched his hands into fists. He couldn't believe what an utter jackass he could be sometimes. He wanted to blame it on lack of experience in a relationship but knew it was his

own damn controlling nature.

Noah told Gage what he wanted to hear because he forced the man to do it. He hadn't given Noah a chance to really speak his mind. Noah was absolutely right. Gage asked his question then kept on asking. Noah had finally told him what he thought Gage wanted to hear instead of how he really felt.

"I need to get back to the apartment and talk to Noah," Gage said as he turned around to run back to the apartment, dinner takeout be damned. They could eat leftovers. He swung around to snarl at Dean when he felt the man's hand on his arm.

"Dude, you might want to slow down a bit and give Noah some space to think. I imagine he needs it as much as you do."

Gage groaned and rubbed his hand down his face. "You don't understand, Dean. I think I really screwed up this time."

"You've screwed up before. You'll do it again. It's called being human... I think." Dean chuckled. "After recent activities, I'm not longer sure that's true."

"Very funny."

"Hey, I'm not the one sleeping with a fur ball, dude." Dean laughed. "That's all on you."

Gage couldn't help but grin as he remembered how much he enjoyed having sex with his fur ball, and all the benefits that came with it. He'd bet his last dollar that Dean would go searching for his own cat shifter if he knew the truth about them.

"And I'll be perfectly happy doing just that for the rest of my life."

"Woohoo," Dean snickered, "listen to you. A few days with the cat and already you're wanting to commit to the guy for life. That's not a little too fast for you?"

"I wish I could explain it to you, I really do, but it's just not something you'd understand unless it happened to you."

Dean's laughter trickled away as he frowned.

"Explain what exactly?"

"Well, you already know about my body getting bigger, right?"

Dean plucked at the new shirt Gage wore and smirked. "Yeah, dude, the new clothes were kind of a dead giveaway. I had to go out and buy them, remember? That, and the fact that you're now a few inches taller than me when you've been shorter the entire time I've known you."

"Well, I'll continue to grow until I am at whatever size can adequately protect Noah. From what he says, as

the true blood king, he is the heart and soul of his pride. As his mate, I'm supposed to be his strength."

"Mate?"

"It's not a dirty word, Dean."

"Are you sure?" Dean sounded skeptical. He looked pained. His lip was curled up at the corner, his eyes wide, and his face paler than it had been a few minutes before. Gage wanted to roll his eyes but didn't.

"Yes, I'm sure. Mate means like..." Gage shook his head. "There's this connection between us that goes deeper than anything I've ever felt in my life. I'm happier when I'm with Noah, you know? Even all that crazy shit he does like labeling his food and needing to be clean all of the time, I like it. I think it's cute."

"Dude, you have it bad."

Gage frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You're in love with the little fur ball."

"Don't be ridiculous. Sure, I like Noah. I like him a lot, but we've only known each other for a few days. I can't be in love with him." Gage waved his hand absently. "Hell, I don't even know what love is."

"Well, apparently, it's Noah."

Gage stopped walking to stare at Dean. Shock and confusion raced through his body and muddled his

thoughts. What did he know about loving someone? He was a killer, a paid assassin. He knew more about killing people than he did about loving them. Dean couldn't be right.

Could he?

Gage felt wave after wave of confusion unlike anything he'd ever felt roll through his body. Could he be in love with Noah? How would he know if he was? It wasn't like he'd had a lot of loving role models growing up in the foster care system. He knew there were good foster homes out there, but somehow, he'd missed being placed in most of them. The ones that raised him made sure he knew he was just a paycheck.

Gage didn't know if it was his closed off personality or his refusal to let anyone close to him, but he'd never found a home with anyone. At least, not until now. Noah made him feel safe and warm and wanted. Was that what love was?

"Come on, dude." Dean motioned with his hand for Gage to join him as he started back down the sidewalk.

"The faster we get the food, the faster you can get back and talk with your little fur ball."

One of these days, Gage knew he was either going to punch Dean square in the mouth or let Noah loose on

him again. However, the man did have a point. Gage needed to get back to the apartment and talk with Noah. He hurried to catch up with Dean, falling into step beside the man.

"Does this whole thing with Noah mean you're going to quit the agency?"

"I don't really know. I hadn't really thought about it."

"You might want to. If you're spending all of your time protecting Noah, it's not going to leave you a lot of time to go on missions."

"I suppose."

"You know I'm right."

Gage did know Dean was right, but he hadn't really thought about quitting his job until that moment. He hadn't thought of his job at all until that moment. His main concern had been keeping Noah safe.

And maybe that was his answer.

"I guess leaving the agency isn't such a bad idea."

"Well, it's definitely something you might want to consider, especially if Trent is trying to kill you as I suspect."

Gage skidded to a stop and stared at Dean. "What?"

Dean shrugged. "I think Trent is trying to kill you."

Why else would he have given you bad intel?"

"Maybe he didn't know it was bad."

"Dude, the last three missions you went on were fucked up in some way. Either the target was off or in the wrong place. The locations were questionable, and there was absolutely no backup. There's no way in hell intel gets screwed up that badly that many times."

Gage shook his head. There had to be a different answer. Trent might not be his best friend, or even a good friend, but Gage had trusted the man for more years than he could remember. Dean had to be wrong.

"Why would Trent want me dead?"

Dean shrugged. "You tell me."

"I don't have a clue."

"Have you checked in with him since the mission went bad?"

"No, the only person I called was you."

"You could always call Trent and arrange a meeting, feel him out." Dean grinned and pointed a finger at Gage. "But if you do, I suggest you take Frick and Frack with you for added protection. I get a feeling those two can take on just about anything."

Gage grinned and started walking again. Dean was right about Braden and Jonas. Both men looked like they

could take on a dump truck and win. Now that they had devoted themselves to Noah, Gage imagined he could get them to help out. They seem to hang on Noah's every desire. It was actually a little weird.

"I just can't think of any reason why Trent would want me dead," Gage said after a few minutes. "We're not best friends or anything, but I've always respected the guy. He's always been there in the past when I needed out of a jam."

"I've always respected Trent too."

"Then what makes you think he's trying to kill me?"

"I'm really not sure I have a concrete answer for you, Gage. It's just something I feel. In the last few months, Trent has gotten weird. He gets phone calls that he always takes in private, has meetings with people behind closed doors, and goes off for days at a time. Trent was never like that in the past."

"What phone calls? What meetings?" Gage frowned. "And how come I never knew about this?"

"You're never in the office, dude. Suits and ties give you hives, remember?"

"That doesn't mean I wouldn't have spotted something going on in those times when I was in the office. Trent may be a little stiff winded but the man knows his

stuff." Gage shrugged. "I don't know, it's just hard for me to wrap my head around."

"I could be wrong here, Gage, but there has to be an explanation as to why Trent is acting so weird and you've had so many close calls. We've been in this business for a long time, maybe too long, but can you actually tell me that the last three missions you went on were normal?"

Gage thought about his last three missions. The first one, three months ago, had been tracking a known arms dealer. Gage's job was to find out who his contact was and eliminate him. Gage never discovered who the contact was. His cover had been blown somehow, and he had to escape.

The second mission had come about six weeks ago. Once again, Gage had been sent to track an arms dealer. Only this time, his job was to track the dealer back to his base and blow up the weapons the agency suspected the man of stockpiling. Gage followed the dealer back to his base, only to discover the weapons had never been there in the first place.

The last mission, the one he was on when he met Noah, was the worst one. Gage had been sent to eliminate the arms dealer. When he arrived, the arms dealer wasn't even where the intel said he was. A warehouse full of armed men had been in the target's place, waiting for Gage.

"Okay, you might have a point," Gage finally said. "My last three missions were fucked up, but I still don't see Trent having anything to do with that. Sometimes, bad intel comes through. It's a fact of life."

"Would you be saying that if you knew several of us have been sent on botched missions in the last three months?"

"How many?"

"You, me, Marcus, and Steele."

"All of us?"

"Well, I'm positive about you, me, and Marcus. Steele hasn't checked in since his last mission, and that has me worried. It's not like him not to check in, you know? He'd at least call to say whether the mission had been completed or not. He always does."

Gage pushed his hand through his hair in a frustrated gesture. The mess he and Noah were in was growing by the second. People wanted Noah dead, and apparently, someone wanted Gage dead as well. They were in such deep shit.

"Dean," Gage said softly as he looked at his best friend, "I need help. I don't know that I can keep Noah safe on my own. Will you help me keep him safe until I can figure this all out?"

"You know it, dude. Consider me cannon fodder."

Gage smirked. Dean might be a strange man, but he was a reliable one. Gage felt better as he started down the sidewalk again. He might not know what was going on, but he would have help keeping Noah safe, and for now, that was enough.

"I think once you have Noah someplace safe, we should arrange a meeting with Marcus and Steele, compare notes and whatnot."

"I agree but keeping Noah safe is my number one priority. None of the rest of this matters right now, only Noah. This can all wait until after I know he's safe."

"Agreed."

Gage nodded as he realized Dean had stopped and was several feet behind him. He turned and looked back at the man, frowning. "What?"

Dean gestured to a large red door. "We're here."

Gage felt his face flush as he walked back to join Dean, walking into the all night Chinese restaurant. Dean was grinning, his amusement clear on every inch of his face.

"Just shut up."

Dean held up one hand in a submissive gesture as he grabbed for the door handle with the other, pulling the

door open. "I didn't say a word."

"You didn't have to." Gage pointed his finger at Dean. "You were thinking it."

"It's not against the law, dude."

"It should be." Gage snickered at Dean as he walked past him into the restaurant. "Maybe I'll have Noah do something about that."

"Noah can't do that," Dean grimaced, "can he?"

The troubled look on Dean's face was priceless. Gage just arched an eyebrow at the man. "We'll see."

"Dude, that's just wrong."

* * * *

Gage nearly ran up the stairs to Noah's apartment, wanting to get back to the man as fast as he could. They needed to talk, a lot. Gage had a few things to say to Noah, and the main one was to apologize to the man for being such an ass.

He knocked on the apartment door and waited for Braden to open it then went inside. He quickly glanced around for his little cat, frowning when he didn't immediately see him. "Where's Noah?"

"He came out right after you left but then went back

into the bedroom," Braden said. "He hasn't come out again, and it's been real quiet in there. I think he's sleeping."

"Okay, well, the food is hot," he said as he put his bags down on the dining table. "Don't make a mess and remember to clean up after yourself or Noah's going to be pissed. That includes loading your dishes in the dishwasher."

His piece said, Gage headed for the bedroom. He smelled the fresh air flowing in from the open window the moment he stepped into the room. Gage tensed, trying to see Noah in the darkened room.

"Noah?" Gage whispered softly. Nothing moved in the room except for the curtains blowing in the night air. The bedroom was chilled, attesting to the fact that the window had been open for quite some time.

Gage quietly made his way to the bathroom and looked in every possible place Noah could be. When he found nothing, he searched the bedroom. Gage's heart pounded with fear when he didn't find any sign of Noah.

"Noah?" he said a little louder as he scanned the room again. "Where are you, kitten?"

Still nothing. Gage raced over to the window and cautiously looked out the open window. He could still see all the cats milling about below on the ground so he knew

Noah had to be close by. It didn't explain why Noah wasn't safe inside the apartment.

"Noah!" All that met Gage's loudly shouted words were the meows of the cats below on the wind. He leaned out the window and scanned up and down the sidewalk and street. Nothing.

Gage was about to lose his mind when a soft mewling noise caught his attention. Gage looked up into the tree a few feet from Noah's window to find two bright green eyes staring down at him.

"Noah, what in the hell are you doing out here?" Gage asked when he recognized the cat looking down at him. "It's not safe, baby. Come back inside."

The cat just meowed at him. Gage knew that Noah could speak to him telepathically so he didn't understand why Noah didn't say anything.

"Please, Noah?"

The white cat stood and turned around in a circle. Gage didn't know much about cats. He'd never had one before. He hoped it meant that Noah was looking for a way down. Gage gestured with his hand.

"Come on, baby." Gage's heart nearly jumped into his throat when Noah jumped down to the branch beneath him, the branch shaking wildly. "Geez, Noah, be careful."

Gage could feel his mouth going dry as he watched Noah effortlessly jump down to the next branch. One wrong step and Noah would plunge several feet down to the ground. There was no way he could land without injury. It was two floors down. He could die.

Gage could feel the wood from the windowsill digging into the palms of his hands as he tightened his grip. The waiting was killing Gage. Noah was everything he wanted in his life but didn't know he wanted until it was threatened. If something happened to Noah, whoever was after them both could have him. He wouldn't even fight it.

Just as Noah was about to jump down to the next branch, he suddenly crouched down and hissed, his eyes moving away from Gage to a spot farther down the street. Sensing Noah's fear, and something different in the air, Gage leaned back into the window and tried to stay hidden while he looked.

The cats milling about on the sidewalk and street scattered, some yowling and some hissing as two dark figures walked out of the darkness. It took Gage a moment to notice that they were similarly dressed to Braden and Jonas. Gage knew then they were pride soldiers and they were there to kill Noah.

Gage quickly crossed to the other side of the

window and held up his hand to Noah, praying that the man would understand he was to stay exactly where he was. Until a plan was in place, the tree was the safest place for Noah.

"Stay still, baby, please, and don't let them see you."

Gage repeated the words over and over again in his head as he rushed for the bedroom door, hoping that Noah could hear him through their link. He'd never tried talking to Noah, just listened to him. Maybe if he had, Noah wouldn't be in a tree.

"Hurry," Noah replied, much to Gage's relief. *"I think they can smell me."*

"I'm hurrying, promise. Just stay where you are. I need to alert the others that trouble is coming."

Gage nearly yanked the bedroom door off its hinges as he pulled it open. Three sets of eyes turned to stare at him in alarm. Gage pressed his hand against his chest as his heart thundered painfully.

"Noah's outside in a tree, and more pride soldiers are coming down the street."

CHAPTER 14

Noah hunkered down into a bunch of leaves on the tree branch as much as he could. He was pretty sure that in the moonlight, his white fur would stand out like a beacon to the two soldiers walking toward him.

If not that, then they would smell him. Cats had a great sense of smell. That's how they were alerted to danger, food sources, and even sexual arousal. Two pride soldiers, trained to differentiate between scents, would pick out Noah's unique smell in a split second if they got close enough.

Noah wished Gage would come back to the window. He was still a little stunned that Gage had come back, but he was too scared to even deal with that right now. He just wanted to be with Gage where it was safe.

"Noah, baby?"

Noah looked away from the two soldiers and back to the open window. *"Yes?"*

"Where are they now?" Gage asked even though Noah couldn't see him through the darkened bedroom window. *"I can't see them from where I'm at, and if I lean out the window any more, they might see me. I need you to be my eyes and ears, kitten. Can you do that for me?"*

"Yes."

Noah glanced back down the sidewalk. The two soldiers were just arriving at the stairs leading up to Noah's building. They stopped and glanced around suspiciously. Noah could see their lips moving, but he couldn't hear what they were saying.

He was afraid they would hear him when his heart started to pound faster. When the two men broke up, one heading inside the building, the other around to the back, Noah didn't even take time to heave a sigh of relief. He wanted back inside the apartment where Gage was.

Noah leapt down onto the next branch and raced to the end. He paused for a moment to catch his balance when the branch began to sway then leapt for the window. Noah's claws dug into the wood of the windowsill as he started to slip.

He'd started to howl, just knowing he was going to plummet to his death, when two hands suddenly grabbed him and pulled him into the bedroom. Noah hissed and spit and clawed at whoever held him, desperate to escape.

"Noah, stop, damn it, that shit hurts!"

Noah collapsed against Gage, suddenly realizing that Gage had been the one to pull him through the open window. His heart pounded in his chest but not with fear. It

pounded with relief. He was safe. He was where he was supposed to be. He was in Gage's arms.

"Fuck, Noah, I thought you were going to fall out of the damn tree." Noah squirmed closer, licking at the wounds his claws had left on Gage's arms. "Don't ever do that to me again, baby. I thought I'd lose my mind when I saw you sitting up on that branch."

Noah's chest rumbled when Gage started to run his hands over his fur. He loved the feeling of Gage's hands on him even when in cat form, although human form had its advantages too.

"Did you hurt yourself at all when you jumped?" Gage asked. "Do you hurt anywhere?"

Noah shifted, finding himself in human form, cradled in Gage's lap as the man sat on the floor next to the window. Noah curled into Gage's arms, closing his eyes as he pushed his face against the man's neck and inhaled his unique scent.

"I'm fine."

Gage's arms tightened around him. "I swear, Noah, if you ever make me scared like that again I will paddle your ass until you can't sit down for a week."

Noah's eyes popped open in surprise. He leaned back to look up at Gage, confused by the fear he could hear

in the man's voice. "Why were you scared? You left."

"I went to get dinner, Noah. I didn't leave."

"You... you went to get dinner?" Noah whispered.

"You weren't leaving me?"

"God, no, what ever gave you that idea?"

"You didn't..." Noah swallowed hard and dropped his eyes from Gage's intense gaze. "You didn't like the answers I gave you so I thought you left."

Noah eagerly pressed his face back against Gage's throat when the man put pressure on his head. "No, I wasn't leaving, kitten. I was just going to get dinner." Gage stroked his hands over Noah's hair and down his back.

"Now, I want you to listen to me. I'm not leaving. I'm never leaving. You and I belong together."

"*Yeah?*" Noah tried not to snuffle when tears sprang to his eyes at Gage's words.

"Yeah. We may have disagreements, but we need to work through them, not ignore them or leave each other over them."

"*I'll never leave you,*" Noah whispered silently.

"There may be times that you want to. I am not an easy man to live with, and I know nothing about being in a relationship. You're my first."

"I think I like the sound of that."

"Yeah?"

Noah chuckled when Gage repeated his word from a moment ago. "Yeah."

Noah's eyes widened when Gage's hand clenched in his hair and his head was yanked back. He started to protest only to have the sound smothered by the mouth covering his. Anything he would have said bled from his head as his mind turned to mush.

Gage's lips brushed his, gently at first, but when Noah opened his mouth and Gage's tongue slipped in, the kiss turned fierce. Noah groaned and turned to push closer to Gage, giving himself up to the passion of the kiss.

Gage had never kissed him before. Noah hoped Gage never stopped kissing him if this was what it felt like. Noah's emotions whirled then skidded as Gage's lips ravished his. The man was a master at kissing, and Noah had every intention of being his eager student.

When Gage finally lifted his head, they were both panting heavily. Noah noted that Gage's eyes were half closed, his face flushed. Noah knew he probably looked much the same way. He was stunned.

"You've never kissed me before," Noah whispered.

One side of Gage's mouth drew up as he grinned.

"Killers don't kiss, Noah."

"I'm sorry." Noah quickly dropped his eyes so Gage wouldn't see the pain that statement brought him. He really liked kissing, but if Gage didn't kiss then he would give that up. Noah tried to keep his eyes downcast as Gage lifted his chin, but he couldn't prevent himself from taking a quick peek. What he found made Noah's heart stutter in his chest.

Gage's face was filled with a peace that Noah only saw after they had sex. The lines of tension had faded from his forehead. The soft smile on his lips looked like it was real, and it reached all of the way up to his beautiful hazel eyes.

"I'm not a killer anymore, Noah. I'm your guardian." Gage's grin grew bigger. "That means I can kiss you whenever I want to."

As if to prove his point, Gage leaned down and claimed Noah's lips again. Noah instantly moaned, leaning into the kiss, pressing himself against Gage's chest as he wrapped an arm around the man's neck. He really liked kissing. It might become one of his favorite pastimes.

"I love kissing you," Noah groaned. "I think I could come just from this."

Gage chuckled and suddenly lifted Noah up, swinging him around until he straddled Gage's lap. Noah

groaned when he felt Gage's cock nudge up against him through his pant bottoms. Gage grabbed his ass and squeezed.

"Someday I'm going to take you like this, Noah," Gage growled into Noah's ear. "I'm going to slide my cock into your ass and just kiss you until you come."

Noah's own cock leapt at Gage's words. "Now?"

Gage chuckled and claimed Noah's mouth in a hunger-filled kiss. Noah would have continued kissing Gage for as long as he possibly could if someone hadn't pounded on the bedroom door. He tensed when Gage growled and pulled his lips away from Noah's.

"Gage, man, you need to get out here, and you need to do it now."

Noah immediately recognized the voice coming through the door as belonging to Dean. It was only as he heard the intensity in Dean's tone that Noah remembered the two soldiers outside that were coming to kill him.

"Gage, those two men, one went inside the building and the other went around back." Noah nervously plucked at the edges of Gage's shirt. "I'm sorry I forgot to tell you."

"It's okay, babe," Gage said as he helped Noah to his feet then stood up himself. Gage's hand never left Noah's arm. "Just stay with me, okay? I don't want anything

to happen to you."

"Gage, I'm tired of these guys coming after me. I just want them all to go away."

"I know, babe."

"I don't like being scared, Gage."

"And you won't have to be much longer, Noah."

Noah almost started purring again when Gage's hand stroked down the side of his face. If he wasn't so scared, he would have. "Just a little longer, babe, and I'll figure this out, okay?"

"I'll be king if that's what you want," Noah said as he looked up at Gage.

"I just want you happy and safe and preferably with me. The rest I don't care about."

"Well, that makes sense." Noah tittered happily.

"The only time I feel happy and safe is when I'm with you."

"Come on, love," Gage said as he started pulling Noah toward the bedroom door, "let's go see what has Dean's pantyhose in a bunch then find these two guys that are after you. I think we also need to have a long discussion with everyone else about this whole king thing."

Noah nodded and followed after Gage until he heard a loud menacing growl come from the direction of the open window. Before Noah could turn around, he was

pushed to the ground and Gage rushed past him.

The noise of a scuffle and loud crashes filled the room as Noah rolled over onto his back. He barely kept from crying out when he saw Gage fighting a full grown lion. And he looked like he might be losing.

"Dean!" Noah screamed at the top of his lungs as he shifted into his cat form. He didn't know what he could do to help Gage, but he couldn't just sit there and watch his mate be injured, maybe killed.

Noah jumped up onto the bed and waited for the right moment. The second the lion and Gage rolled in his direction, Noah attacked. He landed on the lion's fur-covered back and dug his claws in as deep as they would go. He bit down with his teeth, feeling blood flood his mouth as his teeth sank into the lion's ear.

It wouldn't be enough to seriously hurt the lion, but maybe it would be enough to distract him long enough for Gage to gain the upper hand. Noah heard the bedroom door open just as the lion's paw smacked him, sending him flying across the room.

Noah slammed into the wall and slid to the floor with a loud cry. He lay there, panting heavily through the pain racking his body, as he watched Dean and Braden attack the lion assaulting his mate.

The noises —the screaming and yelling, the growling— were all so loud they made Noah's ears hurt. Items around the room crashed to the floor and furniture shattered as the men rolled around, fighting the lion. The place was a mess.

Noah shifted back to human form and grabbed the nearest piece of furniture, a broken table leg from a small table that sat near the window. He climbed to his feet and held the broken leg over his head with both hands, waiting for just the right moment.

It came only a few seconds later when the lion bit into Gage's shoulder and rolled, trying to trap Gage beneath him. Using all of his strength, Noah swung the table leg down over the lion's head. Noah heard a loud howl, and the wooden leg shattered into several pieces.

Noah's breath caught in his throat as the lion's head swung around to him. The lion glared at him for just a second before his eyes rolled back into his head and he slumped to the floor. Noah panted heavily as he stood over the lion, watching to see if he was playing a trick and would suddenly jump up and attack or if he was truly unconscious.

After several moments of the lion not moving, Noah breathed a sigh of relief. He dropped the remains of the

table leg on the floor and rushed across to where Gage was just starting to sit up. Noah dropped to his knees and reached for the man, his eyes taking in every injury in a glance.

Gage was seriously injured. His wounds might not be life-threatening, but they were bleeding a lot, especially the bite mark on Gage's shoulder. Lion teeth could do a lot of damage. Lion teeth *had done* a lot of damage.

"Gage, are you okay?"

"I'll be fine, Noah." Gage winced as he sat up farther and scooted back to lean against the side of the bed. "Why don't you go get me some towels to stop this bleeding?"

Noah nodded and jumped to his feet to race into the bathroom. He was back a moment later, kneeling back down next to Gage. He tried to be careful as he pressed one of the towels to Gage's bleeding wound. He didn't want to do anything that would hurt Gage.

"How bad is it, babe?"

Noah grimaced as he lifted the towel away and saw the damage. Large teeth marks marred Gage's perfect flesh. Jagged slashes showed where the lion's teeth had sunk into skin and muscles.

"I need to make sure nothing is broken," Noah said

as he tentatively reached out and probed the wound, careful not to make direct contact with the injuries. He probed around the edges feeling for anything that might be out of place besides the jagged edges.

"Jeez, Noah, your hand." Gage jerked away.

"What?" Noah cried out as he snatched his hand back. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, but your hand got really hot."

"Hot?" Noah turned his hand over to look at the palm. His eyes widened. He was shocked to see a faint blue light glowing around the palm of his hand. "Wha—"

He'd never seen anything like it. The longer he kept his hand away from Gage, the fainter the blue glowing light became. Noah frowned and moved his hand closer to Gage's wound. The blue light glowed brighter.

"What the fuck?" Gage whispered.

Noah turned his palm over and pressed it down over the open bleeding wound on Gage's shoulder. When he lifted it a moment later, the bleeding had slowed down to the occasional trickle.

Suddenly excited, Noah pressed the palm of his hand against Gage's injury again, this time for a longer amount of time. He could feel Gage staring at him but decided to concentrate on what he was doing rather than

answer the questions he could see forming in his mate's eyes.

When Noah finally lifted his hand again, the wound was no longer bleeding. Pink puckered flesh had knitted together making the bite mark look like it happened days ago instead of just a few minutes.

"How do you feel?" Noah asked as he glanced at Gage.

"Actually, not too bad, a little sore, but there's no real pain." Gage's eyes were filled with confusion as he looked at Noah. "What did you do?"

Noah shrugged. "I'm not sure exactly." He held up his hand and watched the blue light fade totally away from his hand. "I think that blue light thing healed you."

"Are you okay?" Gage asked, grabbing Noah's arm. "You didn't somehow hurt yourself, did you?"

"No, I feel fine."

Gage suddenly yanked Noah closer until they were nose to nose. "Don't ever do something like that again if you don't know what's happening."

"Gage, I was just trying to—"

"I know what you were trying to do, babe, and I appreciate it, but it is never acceptable for you to put yourself into danger. Do you understand?"

"But I—" Noah pointed to the unconscious lion. "I couldn't let him hurt you, Gage."

"I'm not talking about that, Noah." Gage grabbed Noah's hand and held it up to him. "I'm talking about this. You had no idea what would happen when you healed me. You could have been injured or... or worse."

Noah smiled at hearing the near panic in Gage's voice. He pushed forward until their lips met, placing a small kiss on Gage's lips before looking him in the eyes. "I'd do anything to keep you safe."

Even as he said the words, Noah realized he hadn't done everything to keep Gage safe. He'd been too busy trying to keep himself safe. And maybe it was time to change that, time for Noah to stand up and be an equal partner in his relationship with Gage. His mate deserved nothing less.

"I have something I need to do." Noah pulled away from Gage and jumped to his feet. He'd started to cross the room when a slight movement from the lion caught his attention. Noah pointed. "He's waking up. I suggest you either hit him again or tie him up somehow. And does anyone know what happened to the other soldier?"

"Jonas has him in the living room. He's secured."
He turned to glance over his shoulder at Braden

when the man spoke and nodded. "Would you come with me? You know more about all of this than anyone, and I could use your help."

"Of course, Your Highness."

Noah rolled his eyes. "It's Noah, okay? That highness stuff gives me the creeps."

"Yes, Your High—I mean Noah."

Noah nodded and started out of the room only to stop when Gage called him. He turned around to find Gage climbing to his feet, a stern glare making his forehead wrinkle.

"Noah, where in the hell do you think you're going now?" Gage snapped. "There's another one of those shifters in the other room."

"Fine, then come with me." Noah turned and walked out of the room, hoping Braden, and Gage too, were right behind him. He spotted Jonas and the second shifter immediately when he walked into the living room. Jonas was standing in front of the guy, his arms crossed over his chest. The new man sat at his feet, his hands resting on his bent knees.

"What is your name?" Noah asked as he walked right up to the man. He saw Jonas stiffen out of the corner of his eye when the man on the floor glared up at him. "I

believe I asked you a question."

"Fuck you!" the man snapped.

Noah crossed his arms over his chest as he smirked.

"Is that what you want to go with?"

"I don't have to answer any of your questions."

"True, you don't, but your friend in the other room isn't going to be any help to you. I knocked his ass out."

"You?" the man snorted as he looked Noah up and down. "I seriously doubt that."

Noah knew he wasn't that much to look at. He stood inches below everyone in the room and a strong wind was likely to blow him away. Still, that didn't mean he was totally helpless. He had some hidden talents he was only now discovering.

"Want to try me?"

The man growled and tensed as if he were going to jump to his feet and attack. Noah suddenly felt an arm wrap around his waist and pull him away as Braden rushed forward to stand on one side of the man. Jonas stepped closer to stand on the other side, both men surrounding him.

"Noah, this would be easier if you just showed him who you really were," Gage said. "He doesn't know, remember?"

"Fine, but it was more fun my way." He kept his eyes on the soldier as he squatted down on the floor and shifted into his cat form. The man's face paled to a chalky white.

"No!" he shouted. "No fucking way!"

Noah shifted back and stood. "Want to try again?"

"How..." The man shook his head like he couldn't believe what he was seeing. "They said you were dead."

"So, I've been told."

"But, why?" he asked. "You should be ruling the pride, not hiding out here with people being sent to kill you. This is wrong."

"I couldn't agree more," Gage said as he stepped up to stand beside Noah, wrapping what Noah could only surmise as a possessive arm around his waist. "I'm getting real tired of having soldiers come after my mate."

"So, let's end it," Noah said. "Where is King Geraldo currently holding court?"

CHAPTER 15

Gage wasn't so sure he liked Noah's plan, but it had more to do with the tux he'd been forced to wear and less with his mate confronting the current king. Gage knew his mate needed to confront his uncle in order for their nightmare end.

Gage tugged at the black bowtie around his neck. He felt like it was choking him, but Noah said he needed to dress the part in order to get into the garden party the king was throwing for the pride. He'd do what he needed to do in order to blend in with the crowd until Noah could confront the man.

"You look hot."

Gage looked into the mirror past his shoulder to where Noah was standing behind him. He felt his face flush a little at the blatant sexual desire he could read in Noah's milky green eyes. The man was practically eating him alive. Gage could feel his cock perk up in interest. It grew even worse when Noah's eyes widened and his nostrils suddenly flared.

"Gage, you can't do that, not right now." Gage saw Noah's throat move as the man swallowed hard. "We don't have time."

Gage arched an eyebrow, a wicked grin coming to his lips. "We could make time."

Noah looked so indecisive that Gage couldn't help but chuckle. "Don't worry about it, babe. This hotel room probably isn't the place to start anything anyway. I have no idea how thick the walls are and the neighbors are sure to hear us. We can pick this up when we get home."

Noah's eyebrows drew together. "Yeah, about that," Noah said. Gage noticed that his hands were twisting together as if the man was nervous. "If this plays out like I think it will, we might have to move. I mean, if you want to move with me."

Gage turned around to reach for Noah, drawing the man up against his chest. He smoothed the white blond hair back from Noah's upturned face. "I've told you before, kitten, we stay together."

"Then you don't mind moving?"

"It's not like I have more than a studio apartment now anyway, Noah. Before now, I was never really home. Hell, I don't even have a home, Noah, just a single room where I store my stuff and rent it out by the month. It's no better than a storage closet. Whatever we have together, wherever we are, that will be our home."

"Oh."

Gage delighted in the look of wonder on Noah's face. He knew he had shocked his mate. A part of him hoped he would always be able to fill Noah with a sense of awe. "So, wherever we go, it matters not to me as long as we stay together, understood?"

Noah nodded, his mouth still hanging open. Gage chuckled and reached over to place his finger under Noah's chin, shutting the man's mouth. "Are you about ready, love? The others are waiting for us."

Gage knew Noah was nervous about the upcoming confrontation with his uncle. He wished there was some way to comfort his mate beyond standing by his side and protecting him. But this was a battle Noah needed to fight on his own, not just for the others of the pride but for Noah himself.

Little by little, Gage could see his mate coming out of his self-imposed shell. Noah hadn't even thrown a temper tantrum when his bedroom had been virtually destroyed. He just asked Jonas to pick it up then dropped the subject.

Jonas had been all too eager to comply with any demand Noah made. Gage thought Jonas felt he had something to make up to Noah and the man would probably spend the rest of his life doing it. At least, that's what Jonas

said.

Braden and the other two soldiers sent to kill Noah, Lincoln and Carlyle, had also declared their intent to devote themselves to Noah. Gage wondered if Noah knew of the loyalty he inspired in others.

Gage finally understood what Noah meant about being the heart and soul of the pride. Just by being in his presence, the men around Noah felt like they had been touched by greatness. It wasn't as if they saw him as a god or anything but rather the hope for the future of their pride.

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but yeah, let's go."

Gage grinned but kept all comments to himself. Noah was hanging onto his courage by a thread. He walked with Noah out of the bedroom they were in into the main room of the hotel suite they'd rented for the night.

The estate of King Geraldo was over a nine-hour drive from Noah's apartment. It had been decided that they would make the drive then rent a hotel room for the night to rest up before confronting the king.

Braden called a friend who not only got their names on the guest list but secured them invitations to the black tie garden party the king was throwing. It was the only way to get past the guards. Now they just had to show up and blend in until Noah felt the time was right.

"Everyone ready?" Gage asked. Everyone stood and nodded. "Okay, let's go then. Braden, Jonas, I want you two to stick with Noah and me. Carlyle and Lincoln will go with Dean. I want the place scouted out and every guard that might be against Noah spotted before Noah opens his mouth. Is that understood?"

"Could we not go all caveman on me, please?" Noah snapped as he waved his hand toward Lincoln, the man he'd knocked out while in lion form. "I can protect myself, you know? I'm not a compete invalid."

"Baby, it has nothing to do with going all caveman on you," Gage said quickly. He could see where this line of discussion was going. "I'm supposed to be the strength to your heart and soul, remember?"

Noah sighed loudly and nodded.

"Well, part of that strength is knowing when to use the assets I have on hand to keep you safe." Gage pointed to each of the men standing around staring at them. "Meet my assets."

Gage waited as Noah stared at him for several moments. The man seemed to be mulling his words over. If Gage was truthful with himself, Noah had the right to be concerned. Gage had every intention of going *all caveman* on him. He'd use every weapon in his arsenal to keep Noah

safe from harm.

"Fine!" Noah said as he suddenly swung around and headed for the door. He paused at the door to turn and point his finger at Gage. "But if I feel you're going overboard, I won't purr for a week."

Gage pressed his lips together to keep from grinning as he followed after Noah. It was hard considering the regal little sway in Noah's steps. If the man thought he wasn't king material, he was totally wrong. He definitely had the swagger and commanding tone down to an art form.

"Coming?" he asked he looked over his shoulder at the other men. He could see that they were trying hard not to laugh. Gage just smirked. "Laugh all you want but your time is coming. And I happen to know I'm getting laid tonight."

The grins fell off the faces of Braden, Jonas, Lincoln, and Carlyle to be replaced by deep frowns. Gage quickly turned and followed Noah out of the hotel suite. He caught up with Noah just as he reached the elevator and looped an arm around his shoulders. The rest of the guys were right behind them

They rode downstairs and headed for the limousine Braden had rented. Gage thought it was a little over the top, but Braden assured him that showing up in style was the

only way to go unnoticed in King Geraldo's crowd.

The ride to the estate of the pride king just outside of town took less than twenty minutes. Gage could feel Noah's fingers pulling on his pant leg the closer they got. He glanced at the men sitting with them in the back of the limousine and noticed they were trying not to look at Noah's nervous fidgeting.

Gage was grateful for their gesture, but he still reached down and covered Noah's hand with his own and gave it a little squeeze. Noah smiled and leaned into him. *"It'll be okay, kitten,"* Gage said through their link.

"Promise?"

"I do."

"I'm not sure you can promise that, Gage."

"Sure I can. I have a vested interest in keeping your ass safe." Gage grinned down at Noah and wiggled his eyebrows. *"I plan on using it later tonight."*

Noah's mouth dropped open for just a moment then the man burst out laughing. The tension drained from his face to be replaced by a wide smile and pale green eyes sparkling with laughter.

Mission accomplished.

Unfortunately, all of the laughter that filled Noah instantly drained away when they reached the gate to King

Geraldo's estate. The car came to a stop for a moment as the driver handed out their invitations and the guest list was checked then they were waved on through.

They followed the driveway until they came up to a large house, so huge that Gage was sure a hundred people could live inside. The car stopped just past the large double front doors, and someone opened the door. Dean, Lincoln and Carlyle climbed out first and walked in. Braden, Jonas, Gage, and Noah were next.

Gage could feel Noah jump when the valet closed the door behind him. He kept his hand pressed into the small of Noah's back, partly because he wanted some connection with the man and partly to reassure Noah that he was there.

They followed the flow of people through an open gate and around to the back of the house where the garden party was taking place. Gage nodded to Braden and Jonas as he gestured to Noah to stop for a moment. He needed to take in the view and get a lay of the land, so to speak.

White cloth-covered tables sat around a large grotto-style pool with floating candles adding to the soft afternoon light. Closer to the house, a band had been set up with the stone patio being used as a dance floor. All along one side of the tables was a large white tent with table after

table loaded down with food.

There were people everywhere, some dancing, some standing, and some sitting at the white cloth-covered tables. Waiters with trays of food and drinks wound in between guests. And everyone was dressed in their finest, except for the men on the edges of the party. Gage could immediately tell that the men dressed in black suits were armed to the teeth.

He suddenly has misgivings about what they were about to do. Noah could be seriously hurt, or worse. Gage grabbed Noah's arms in a tight grip. "Maybe we shouldn't do this, Noah. There are a lot of guns here."

"It's not the guns I'm worried about." Noah snorted then pointed across the yard to a rather short looking man dressed in a black tuxedo much like they wore. "It's him."

Gage looked at the man and tried to see him as a threat, and he just couldn't. He looked like a dressed-up, overstuffed mannequin. Even his face looked pasty as if he used makeup to cover imperfections on his face.

"That's your uncle?"

"That's King Geraldo."

Gage was shocked. He'd built this man up into this evil monster, and he had been all wrong. He doubted the man was more than a couple of inches taller than Noah.

Although, by the way the buttons on his dress shirt were bulging, the man outweighed Noah by at least a hundred pounds.

Gage suddenly felt a whole lot better. "Come on, babe, let's go get your throne back."

The four of them walked into the party as if they were supposed to be there. Gage noticed that they did get several strange looks, especially him. He attributed it to his increased weight and height. He was one of just a few taller people in the crowd.

"Where should we do this, Braden?"

"The dance floor would be the best place," Braden said. "We can easily escape back through the house if need be. Jonas and I will take care of the music."

Gage nodded, having thought the same thing. "Let's go dance our way to the band, babe. We need to wait until Braden and Jonas cut the music so you can confront your uncle."

"I don't dance."

"You do today," Gage said as he drew Noah onto the dance floor.

"No, seriously, Gage, I don't dance. I don't even have two left feet. I have stumbling stumps."

"Just hold onto me and I'll take care of the rest."

Gage quickly learned that Noah was speaking the truth. By the time they had danced their way across the dance floor, his feet had been stepped on so many times he had doubts a good polishing job could get the scuff marks out.

"Sorry."

"You did warn me."

"I did."

Gage smiled. "It's okay, I'll teach you to dance one of these days."

"Promise?"

"Always." Gage suddenly realized they had reached the edge of the dance floor. He stopped dancing and pulled Noah off to one side. Braden stayed glued to their sides. Jonas stood behind the band next to the electrical switch which would cut off the power to the band's music. Gage quickly looked around and spotted the other three men slowly making their way toward the patio.

He drew in a deep breath and nodded to Jonas. The music cut out a moment later. Gage watched people slowly stop dancing to look around in confusion. He motioned with his head for Braden to herd them off the patio. He didn't want any innocent bystanders getting hurt if things went south.

"Hey, what is this?" Gage turned to see the fat little king quickly making his way toward the band. He was huffing and puffing by the time he reached the patio area.

"Why have you stopped playing?"

"Hello, uncle," Noah said as he stepped forward.

King Geraldo froze, staring at Noah like he was seeing a ghost. "No-Noah."

"Well, at least you remember who I am."

King Geraldo stared at Noah for a moment more before letting out a shaky laugh, his eyes darting left and right to look at all the people standing around watching the exchange. "Noah, I thought you were dead."

"Did you?" Noah asked. Gage could feel how much Noah was shaking, but the man hid it well, his voice strong and steady. Gage was so damn proud he could have burst with pride. "If you thought I was dead then why did you send people to kill me?"

"Oh, I... uh... I would never do that. You must be mistaken, Noah."

"Really?" Noah gestured to Braden and Jonas, who had both walked over to stand next to him. "You didn't send Braden and Jonas out to kill me?" Noah pointed to the other men. "What about Lincoln and Carlyle? You didn't send them either?"

Geraldo's eyes shot wildly around to the growing crowd again. Gage could almost see the beads of sweat trickling down the man's temples. Geraldo was nervous. He had to know that his potion of power was going up in flames right before his eyes.

Knowing how men like King Geraldo reacted in situations like this, Gage tensed, expecting the man to make some sort of desperate move to retain his throne. Gage didn't know what that move would be, but he was ready for it when it happened.

"Noah, son," the king said as he stepped toward them, "I would nev—"

"I'm not your son," Noah said. "I only had one father, and you killed him. I may not be able to prove it at this point, but both you and I know you did it."

"What?" Geraldo shouted. "I would never—"

Noah held up his hand to stop the man. "Your mistake was going after my mate. I would have let you keep ruling the pride. I didn't want it. I never wanted it. I just wanted a quiet life with my mate, but when you threatened him, you changed things."

"Your mate?" Gage felt the man's eyes fall on him and smirked. "Him? A human?"

"Whether my mate is human or not is not up for

discussion. He is my mate, and that's all you need to know." Noah's head tilted to one side. "But you knew I had a mate, didn't you? That's why you sent your soldiers to kill me."

"I never sent anyone to kill you, Noah."

"Oh really?" Noah's arms crossed over his chest.

"Braden? Jonas? Do you have something to say about what King Geraldo has said? What about you, Lincoln? Carlyle?"

Braden stepped forward and nodded. "Jonas and I were ordered by King Geraldo to eliminate a threat to his throne. We were told it was a distant relative that was proclaiming himself to be king."

"Lincoln? Carlyle? What about you two?"

"We were informed by our king that our fellow soldiers, Braden and Jonas, had been killed by an imposter. The king ordered us to take care of the imposter and the threat to the king's throne."

"Gee," Noah said as he glanced at Braden and Jonas, "they look pretty good for dead men."

Gage had a hard time keeping his lips pressed together when he wanted to howl with laughter. King Geraldo's face was fused with red. The low growl emanating from the man could only be heard by those close

to him, but Gage imagined it was everything the man could do not to roar with outrage.

"I never ordered anyone to kill you, Noah. These men are obviously lying." Geraldo gestured to several men standing beside him, snapping his fingers. "They have maligned their king. I want them taken away."

The guards frowned, obviously confused, but they didn't make a move towards Braden, Jonas, Lincoln, or Carlyle. It wasn't until he glanced around that Gage noticed Braden shaking his head slightly at the guards.

"Did you hear me?" King Geraldo shouted as he turned to glare at the unmoving guards. "I gave you a direct order."

"You gave them an order they cannot follow," Noah said. "I imagine they are men of honor, unlike you, uncle. You've retained the throne for twenty-five years, a throne that you know does not belong to you."

"I am king!" Geraldo shouted as he swung back around to glare at Noah.

"No, I am king!" Noah shouted right back.

Gage glimpsed the rage on Noah's face for just a split second before the man shifted into his house cat form. Gage's muscles tensed when Noah started walking forward toward his uncle. The silence was deafening as everyone

present stared at the cat on the patio. Then, slowly, the whispering started amongst the guests.

Noah shifted back to human form a few feet from his uncle. "I am the true blood king of this pride, not you. And I am here to take my rightful place. As of this moment, you are no longer in charge of this pride."

Gage saw it start to happen before he could reach Noah. In the blink of an eye, Geraldo shifted into a lion and lunged at Noah. Gage's heart seized in his chest. He heard the shouting and growling, but it all came at a distance as he rushed toward his mate, hoping to reach him before the lion's lethal claws did.

Before Gage could reach him, Noah shifted back into his cat form and jumped in the air, all claws and teeth as he landed on Geraldo's head. Geraldo let out a loud roar and started swinging his head back and forth trying to dislodge Noah. When that didn't work, he started swiping at Noah with his paws.

One good swipe of Geraldo's large paw, and Noah went flying. Gage dove forward and caught Noah in his arms before he could land on the ground. He knew cats were supposed to land on their feet, but even he doubted Noah could do that after being hit by a lion.

Gage ignored the loud roars and shrill screams that

filled the air and concentrated on the one thing that meant anything to him, Noah. He knew the four guards who devoted themselves to Noah would keep them safe while he checked his mate over for injuries. He trusted in the loyalty they had for the cat in his arms.

"Noah, are you okay?" Gage panted heavily as he sat up and cradled Noah in his arms. He stroked his hands over the cat's body looking for any sign of injury. Gage didn't breathe a sigh of relief until he found no wounds marring Noah's perfect white furry body. He held Noah close to his chest and buried his face in the cat's fur, inhaling Noah's sweet scent. *"Fuck, baby, you scared me to death."*

"I scared myself."

Gage slowly stood to his feet and looked around, disturbed at the silence that seemed to fill the area. Several members of the pride had shifted into lion form, including Jonas and Lincoln. Carlyle and Braden stood with Gage and Noah, guarding them from anyone and everyone.

"Could you put me down?"

"Do I have to?"

Gage could hear Noah's laughter through their bond. *"No, not really, but we should take care of this situation, and I think it would be better if I did it in human*

form. I still need to make sure my uncle is removed from the throne."

At the mention of Geraldo, Gage quickly scanned the area for the large lion, but he couldn't immediately see him. Instead, a large crowd stood in front of him. Some of the people were in human form, some in lion form. All of them were looking at Noah as if he were a treasure beyond measure. Gage agreed.

"Braden, where is he?" Gage asked, knowing that the man would know exactly who he was talking about. Gage arched an eyebrow in curiosity when Braden gestured to the large group of lions standing directly in front of him and Noah.

Gage felt Noah crawl up and wrap around his neck, settling on his shoulder. Noah's paws kneaded his muscles and the tension in them slowly started to release. When Noah began purring, Gage knew the worst of the danger had passed, even if he hadn't seen Geraldo yet.

The crowd suddenly parted, revealing a prone body on the ground covered in blood. The black tuxedo Geraldo had worn was torn to shreds along with a good portion of his body. It was actually quite disgusting.

"Well, that was kind of anti-climatic." Braden chuckled.

Braden was right as far as Gage was concerned. He'd expected a huge battle, maybe with several members of the lion pride involved, if not all of them. He never expected the pride to turn on the man they had looked to for leadership for almost a quarter of a century.

"It was almost too easy." Gage snickered. "We didn't even need to touch him."

"The pride was pissed that Geraldo hid Noah's existence from them for so long," Braden said. "He is the heart and soul of our pride, and we need him. To know he was out there on his own when he should have been here with us, well..." Braden shrugged and waved his hand at Geraldo's body, "you can see how we feel about that."

"I guess!" Gage exclaimed. "I'd hate to see what they'd do if they really hated someone."

"It's never a good idea to piss off a lion pride."

"You used to be fun, dude," Dean grumbled, shaking his head as he walked up to stand next to Gage and Noah. "You'd call, we'd kill someone, go get laid. Now you're rescuing people and walking around with the white pussy cat like some douche Bond villain."

"You're just pissed because you didn't find your own house cat." Gage laughed as Noah leapt down to the ground and shifted back to human form. Gage reached out

and wrapped an arm around Noah's waist and pulled the man back into the curve of his body. He kissed the top of Noah's head then grinned over at Dean when the man snorted. "I'm the smart one of the group. I claimed the cat king."

CHAPTER 16

Noah smiled and nodded as he tried to keep from rolling his eyes as yet another pride member bowed to him as he walked down the hallway toward the office where Gage was working. He needed to see his mate and now. It might be more important than breathing.

Noah shook his head as someone else bowed to him. He didn't think he'd ever get used to all of the bowing and reverence paid to him by the pride members. He was just an ordinary guy despite everyone's insistence that he was the king. They saw him as some sort of miracle.

Noah figured his confusion came from growing up outside of the pride. He knew what a true blood king meant to the pride. He just never really understood it. Noah didn't think anyone should be above the pride, or adored in such a fashion.

In the month since the death of his uncle, Noah had seen more and more of the adoration his pride had for him. It manifested itself in the growing number of cat shifters that arrived and requested his permission to join the pride. It seemed everyone wanted to belong to a cat pride that had a true blood king.

The one thing Noah was grateful for was the

multitude of people that waited for his every demand. Not because he wanted servants to cater to his every whim but because the place was just too big for him to clean by himself.

When it became clear that Noah was a clean freak, the large estate they moved into started to sparkle as everyone tried their hardest to keep it clean and organized to please their king. Noah still did a little here and there, but that was just because he was obsessive and he knew it. It also helped calm his nerves when things got too weird.

Precious, on the other hand, was in heaven. The damn cat was being treated like the queen of her own pride. Noah was pretty sure he'd have to put her on a diet pretty soon if people didn't stop sneaking her treats. She even had a large bed and almost always had someone carrying her around. Gage was right. She was spoiled rotten.

But, maybe he was too. The gifts of flowers and food and other items that started to arrive from his pride members and other shifter prides around the world astounded Noah. It seemed everyone wanted to welcome Noah. It was odd.

Noah smiled and nodded again when another pride member bowed to him then quickened his pace down the hallway. The effects of the mating heat were starting to hit

Noah for the first time, and he felt like his skin was going to peel right off his body. He just wanted to get to Gage and have the man caress every inch of his body.

Noah was almost running by the time he opened the door to the office Gage was working in. He saw Gage, Braden, and Dean look up when he stumbled in and shut the door behind him, leaning back against the cool wood.

"Noah, is everything okay?" Gage asked as he came to his feet.

Noah bit his lip and glanced at the other two men in the room. *How do I say I need to jump Gage's bones without offending the other two men?* Noah wondered. He stepped away from the door and took a couple of steps closer to Gage, the need for his mate shooting through his body almost making it impossible to speak civilly.

"Could I have a moment of your time?" Noah asked hopefully. "In private?"

"Yes, of course," Gage said as he gestured to Dean and Braden. "Could you two excuse us for a moment?"

Dean looked confused, his eyebrows drawn together as he walked toward the door. "Gage, we'll finish this discussion later then? I have a few leads I want to check out."

"Yes, just don't do anything until we hear from

Steele. I don't know what's up with Trent, but we need to face this together. Marcus is already on his way here. Once Steele checks in, we'll have him come here too and then make a plan. Okay?"

Dean nodded and walked out of the room. Braden wasn't so easy. He had his arms crossed over his chest as he glanced back and forth between Gage and Noah, a mischievous smirk on his lips. When he just continued to stare, making no move towards the door, Noah's craving for Gage overcame his common sense.

"Braden, get the hell out."

"Yes, Your Highness." Noah's angry hiss was met with amused laughter as Braden walked to the door. "Have fun, Your Highness."

Noah growled and flicked his claws. Braden's laughter could be heard through the door he closed behind him and down the hallway. Noah wasn't amused and decided he would get back at the man somehow. Flea powder was looking pretty good right about now.

"Noah!" Gage exclaimed, looking at him like he had lost his mind. "What in the hell is wrong with you?"

Noah reached for the buttons on his shirt and started stalking Gage. He had his shirt unbuttoned and off his shoulders by the time he reached Gage's side of the large

wooden desk. When Noah reached for the zipper on his jeans, Gage inhaled sharply.

"Oh hell, you've gone into heat, haven't you?"

The scent of Gage's instant arousal hit the air like a tidal wave. Noah's knees almost buckled as he was swamped with the smell of man and musk and need. He quickly pushed his shoes off his feet then kicked his jeans down his legs and away from his body until he stood naked before his mate.

While his body naturally prepared itself for Gage's possession when he smelled the man's arousal, when Noah was in heat, the effect was ten times worse. Noah could feel his aching hole opening, the natural lube he created warming inside of him.

"Gage," Noah whispered then blinked in surprise. He didn't even sound like himself. He sounded needy, which he was, but his voice also had a deep sensual tone to it. He never thought he'd hear himself sound like that, but he was glad he did when he saw Gage swallow hard.

Noah walked forward until he stood between Gage and the edge of the desk then leaned back and lay down on the desktop, spreading his legs. Noah watched Gage as he stroked his hands down his overly sensitive body. The man's eyes were huge, almost dominating his face.

"I need, mate."

"Holy fucking shit!" Gage choked out as he starting shedding his own clothes. As quickly as he moved, Noah was pretty sure some of Gage's clothing would end up in the garbage bin after being ripped and torn as Gage pulled them from his body.

Noah's breath hitched in his throat when Gage dropped the last item of clothing to the floor and stepped between his spread legs. Noah lifted his feet and placed them on the edge of the desk, spreading himself even farther.

He knew what he wanted, and he wanted it right now. And what he wanted was thick and hard and dripping with pre-cum. Noah leaned up and reached down to wrap his fingers around Gage's wide shaft. He grinned when Gage groaned and his head dropped back on his shoulders.

"I want you, Gage, right now."

"Noah." Gage looked back down at Noah, his eyes glowing with desire. "You keep that up and you're going to get more than you bargained for, kitten."

Noah grinned. "I'm counting on it."

Gage gripped Noah's hips with his hands as he thrust his hips forward, shoving his cock through the tight hold Noah had on his cock. "Just how exactly does this heat

of yours work, kitten? Do I fuck you until you can't stand or until you pass out?"

"Both?" Noah moaned. "Either?"

"So be it."

Noah was aroused beyond anything he'd ever felt before. He was ready to combust just from smelling Gage's arousal. But the feeling he got when Gage pulled away from him and then slowly started to sink into his ass was more than Noah's sensitive body could handle.

Noah cried out, arching into the air as his body erupted, ropes of pearly white seed shooting out of his cock. Noah's body continued to throb though, his orgasm barely passing before he wanted it again. Noah's cock didn't even soften, just stood up straight and hard.

"Damn, baby, that was something." Gage grinned and pulled his hips back until just the head of his cock remained buried in Noah's ass. "I guess we're done then."

Noah whimpered.

"Or not."

Noah's cry of delight filled the room as Gage rammed back into him, filling every inch of his ass. Gage's body had finally stopped growing when the man reached six foot six and two hundred eighty- five pounds. His cock had stayed right up with his body, growing several inches

longer and a might wider.

The increased size insured that Noah felt every movement Gage made, whether the man was pulling out or pushing in. Noah felt it all. Every time Gage fucked him, Noah could feel the man's cock drag against his sweet spot the entire way.

With his body over-sensitized from being in heat, the effect was multiplied, his body more aware of every move, every touch. Gage had only thrust into Noah a few times and already he could feel himself moving towards another orgasm. He'd be dead by the end of the day. Noah just knew it.

Was it possible to die from too many orgasms?

"Are you going to come for me again, baby?"

Noah nodded. He could see Gage watching as his cock slid in and out of Noah's ass. Gage was licking his lips as if the sight was exhilarating to him. His skin was flushed and growing sweaty as he pounded into Noah's ass, and Noah loved every second of it.

Noah's body suddenly seized again, a loud cry falling from his lips as another orgasm swept through him. Noah panted heavily as his cock spurted again, more ropes of cum landing on his chest.

Gage looked up and grinned, rubbing the cum into

Noah's skin. "That was fucking hot, babe. Want to try for a third?"

A third orgasm?

Noah's eyes almost crossed. Did he have another one in him? Could he survive another one? The ache in his still hard cock said not only would he experience a third orgasm but maybe more after that. Noah was now positive he was going to die from too much pleasure.

Gage suddenly lifted Noah up into his arms then sat down in the chair behind him. Noah groaned as he slid down Gage's cock a few more inches. His body felt like it was all melty. He could barely lift his head to look up into Gage's face.

"Wha—"

"We were going to see if I could get you to come just from kissing you, remember?"

Noah whimpered.

"My cock in your ass, my lips on yours."

Noah's body shuddered as Gage leaned toward him. His breath stuttered in his throat as Gage claimed his lips in a deep, soul-searing kiss that Noah felt all of the way down to his toes. He felt like Gage was trying to imprint himself onto him.

When Gage's hand clenched in his hair, tilting his

head slightly, Noah returned the man's kiss with reckless abandon. He loved the way Gage kissed. He loved the way Gage made love to him. He loved the way Gage did everything with Noah's happiness in mind.

He loved Gage.

Noah moaned into Gage's mouth when the man delved deeper. Gage's tongue stroked against his, and Noah felt like he'd licked a light socket. His senses reeled as if short-circuited. Noah started humping his hips against Gage's, trying to drive the man's cock farther into his ass. He groaned in protest when Gage suddenly gripped him around the waist, holding him still.

"Uh uh, kitten, just from my cock in your ass and kissing, remember?"

Noah was going to die and then he was going to kill Gage. He wasn't complaining a moment later when Gage went back to kissing him. The man was a kissing machine. His tongue seemed to know every place to lick to get Noah's nerves tingling.

"Gage!" Noah screamed as the pleasure racing through his body exploded in one maelstrom of ecstasy. His consciousness seemed to ebb then lighten even brighter than ever before, his senses filling with everything that was Gage.

"My turn, kitten," Gage rasped heavily. He stood up and laid Noah back down on the desk, hunching over him. Noah lifted his legs up, hooking them over Gage's shoulders, watching with delight as Gage's eyes closed for a brief moment and the man groaned loudly.

Gage started pounding into Noah even before his eyes opened back up again. The force of his long deep thrusts pushed Noah up the desk top so Noah reached down and grabbed the edge of the desk with his hands, anchoring himself in place.

Noah wasn't sure he had another orgasm in him but he'd thought that before. His cock was still hard and leaking, and he couldn't seem to draw enough air into his lungs to speak, or to beg, whichever was the case. Gage seemed to understand the small whimper Noah let out and reached down to grab his cock.

"Oh!" Noah cried. He arched his body up. His head banged back against the hard wooden desk, and his legs tightened on Gage's shoulders.

"That's right, baby, come all over my cock."

Gage's dirty words combined with the cock pounding into his ass and the hand stroking his hard length sent Noah over the edge. Noah screamed out his delight as untold pleasure racked his small frame. He didn't even care

that probably everyone in the mansion heard him shout.

Noah could barely keep his eyes open, but it was worth the fight to watch Gage's body stiffen, the corded muscles on his neck bulging as the man found his own release. Noah felt Gage's cock expand and thicken as the knot took hold inside of him. Spurt after hot spurt filled Noah's ass, overwhelming him.

Noah's cock tried to send him over the edge one last time as Gage's pleasure soaked into Noah's body, but it was a halfhearted effort, barely a trickle of cum shooting out. Still, it was enough to make Noah tremble as exhaustion forced him to drop his legs from around Gage's shoulders.

Gage grunted and leaned down over Noah, his chest moving rapidly as he tried to draw in a breath. "Th-that's what it's like when you go into heat?"

"I don't know. I've never gone into heat before. It doesn't happen until we mate."

Gage nodded, but somehow, Noah knew he wasn't saying yes to anything, just agreeing with Noah's words. Noah reached up and stroked his hand across Gage's flushed face. "Are you okay?"

"I'm golden, kitten." Gage grinned. "I just need to catch my breath."

"Um..." Noah whispered when he felt his cock

throb and jerk.

"Again?"

Noah grimaced and nodded.

"Sweet hell, baby, you're going to kill me." Gage chuckled. "And here all this time I thought I was the assassin."

"No," Noah said as he wrapped his arms around Gage's neck and drew the man's naked and sweaty body closer to him. "You're the cat's meow."

The End

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stormy believes the only thing sexier than a man in cowboy boots is two, or three men in cowboy boots. She also believes in love at first sight, soul mates, true love, and happy endings.

Stormy lives in the great Northwest region of the USA, with her gorgeous husband and soul mate, six very active teenagers, two boxer/collie puppies, one old biddy cat, and a fish.

You can usually find her cuddled in bed with a book in her hand and a puppy in her lap, or on her laptop, creating the next sexy man for one of her stories. Stormy welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website at www.stormyglenn.com.

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