

BREA ALEPOU

*His
Bewildered
Mate*

"All I need and want is you."

Unexpected Mates Book 1

HIS BEWILDERED MATE

Unexpected Mates Book I



BREA ALEPOÚ

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***Warning This book contains mpreg and although there is no male birth in the first book there will be later on in the series. This book is the first book in an ongoing series. This work is for ages 18+.

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"RHY, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

Dezi walked into the room, his broad shoulders not fitting between the boxes that were neatly stacked in the room Rhy was in. He had a system, and it was a simple system: the shit he needed now was over by the door, and the shit he didn't need was in the back of the room. The only problem was Rhy couldn't find the shit he needed now.

"Looking for the documents," Rhy replied.

"In this mess?" Dezi sounded unsure.

Rhy rolled his eyes. He could find it. He was sure he had put it in the pile under the box closest to the door. Rhy moved back to that section of the room. He had checked when he first walked in but had had no luck. A second time would probably work. There had been plenty of times in the past when Rhy overlooked something the first time.

He moved one of the boxes to the back of the room, knowing he wasn't going to use it soon.

"Found it," Rhy announced.

"Are you sure?" Dezi joked.

"Ha. Ha. Ha. You know, you aren't all that funny," Rhy remarked. He climbed over a few boxes and was standing near the door in seconds. He looked back at Dezi, trying to get out without hitting anything and making a mess.

Rhy laughed. Dezi was way too big to try maneuvering around places as if he was a house cat.

"Don't laugh at me," Dezi grumbled.

It made Rhy laugh more. "Yes, Alpha."

Dezi made it to the door, but only after he knocked over three boxes. "This room needs to be organized and cleaned up. How the hell are we supposed to run a business with all this shit everywhere?"

"It's organized. It's only a mess now because you knocked over the boxes." Rhy looked at the office past Dezi's shoulder and tsked at his alpha and best friend. "You just had to go in there swinging your weight around."

Dezi blushed. Rhy laughed under his breath as he turned to walk away. If he stood there any longer, he would forget about why he came down there in the first place.

"Where are you going?" Dezi asked, his long strides easily matching Rhy's.

Rhy was a little taller than Dezi, but where Rhy beat him in height, Dezi beat him in sheer amount of muscle. Rhy was on the leaner side, his muscles more compact.

"Customer," he answered.

Dezi stopped in his tracks when they made it outside the door. "Human," Dezi whispered as he took in a big whiff of air.

Rhy nodded. "Yep and willing to pay the big bucks, so if you will excuse me."

Rhy moved past Dezi. He plastered a huge grin on his face before greeting the old lady once more. She smelled of mothballs and peppermint candy. There was another scent accompanying her, one of sickness. Rhy

looked her up and down, but there were no signs of it.

Her hair grayed only on the sides, and she still had dark brown in the middle. Rhy was tempted to ask her if she dyed it, but because he was a shifter, he would have been able to smell the dyeing chemicals.

"Welcome." He directed the older lady to the chair that sat across from his desk. He pulled the chair out and waited for her to sit.

She blushed. "What a fine young man," she whispered.

It had Rhy's face heating up and most likely turning red. Rhy smiled and moved back before having a sneezing fit. The smell of mothballs was stronger closer to her. He moved to his side of the desk, half tempted to go to the other side of the room, but it would be rude, and Rhy was a professional.

"What can I do for you?"

The older lady's frail hands shook as she grabbed her burgundy colored purse and frantically searched through it. Tissue and peppermints landed on Rhy's desk to clear the way for whatever the lady was searching for. Rhy was sure it would be a photo. Most people who came into the office seeking their services had a photo of exactly who they needed found. There had been cases when they didn't have a photo, but it made the job harder. A photo guaranteed an easy find.

She stopped searching, and her head shot up as she looked at Rhy's with a pleading look, as if he may know what she was looking for and where it was located. Rhy patiently waited for her to speak. When a customer was frantic like the older woman was, Rhy had learned that it was best to give them a second to collect themselves. Helping might make them more anxious or make them feel rushed. Rhy would not rush the older lady; it wasn't like he had anything else to do.

"Mr. Fluffkins disappeared two days ago. He usually comes back after a few minutes outside. He doesn't like the outside all that mu—"

Rhy's hated to interrupt her, since she sounded distressed, but he needed to understand what she was wanting. "Mrs...." He paused; sure she hadn't

given her name. He didn't want to try, though if he was to guess, he would have said she looked like a Francis. He was sixty percent sure that would be her name.

"Mary-Anne Crawford," she supplied.

Rhy smiled at her. "Mrs. Crawford, I don't mean to interrupt you, but you know that this is a PI office, right? When we go out searching, we find people. Not pets."

He went for the gentle approach, since he knew how some people treated their pets like people.

She nodded, some of her gray strands coming loose. "I know, but you have to help me find Mr. Fluffkins. He is more than just my cat. Ever since my husband died, he is all I have left. We had no kids, just one cat." Her big brown eyes pleaded and tugged at Rhy's heartstrings.

He was a sucker for the old ladies. He wished he had had an older lady like her in his life when he was a kid. He bet she would have easily taken him in and fed him until his belly popped. Rhy sighed, knowing he was going to take the job but wouldn't be able to list it as an official job, since finding cats wasn't something they offered.

"I will help you, Mrs. Crawford, as much as I can. I've never gone looking for a cat, but I will try my best," Rhy reassured her.

Mrs. Crawford, looking seconds away from tears, smiled up at him. "Thank you." Her shaking hands reached out to him and gripped his hand tightly. "Thank you so much," she repeated.

Rhy patted her hands. "Do you have a picture of the cat? And a list of places the cat goes when outside, if you have them."

Mrs. Crawford pulled back her hands, shoving them back into the purse, back to searching now that she had Rhy's assurance he would help her. Rhy watched as she pulled out a folded piece of paper. She unfolded it and passed it over to him.

He looked down at a photo that showed a young couple. He could point

out Mrs. Crawford easily; her hair was mostly chestnut brown, but her big brown eyes showed clearly in the photo. She sat in a rocking chair and standing behind her had to be Mr. Crawford in his younger days. In Mrs. Crawford's lap lay a fluffy black kitten with a bright red bow around its neck.

"That day, Sam brought home a kitten, and it was the first day Mr. Fluffkins became a part of our family. He is the only family I have left." Tears fell as she tried to continue speaking.

Rhy opened the drawer next to him and pulled out one of the many boxes of tissues he kept on hand. He slid the box over to her. He watched as she blew her nose and wiped her tears away. He waited until she collected herself a little.

"You get me the places you know of, and your address, and I'll see if I can find Mr. Fluffkins."

The smile that he earned, made him feel proud. He only hoped that he would be able to find the cat. With a name like Mr. Fluffkins, He would run away too, but Mrs. Crawford seemed like the loving and cherishing type.

He looked at the picture once more. "Are there any recent pictures of the cat?"

She nodded and went back into her purse, moving things around. Rhy wanted to shake his head. Her purse was full of all types of things. He wouldn't be surprised if she pulled a lamp out next, like that one magical nanny.

"Here you go," she said as she passed over three new pictures. "I have more; just give me one second."

Rhy didn't doubt it. He reached for the photos, turning them over to look at the pictures of the cat.

"Rhy."

He turned to see Kenny standing in the doorway. Mrs. Crawford also turned to see. Her eyes went wide at Kenny's presence. Rhy wanted to laugh at her reaction of seeing a black man with long, curly black hair and startling

silver eyes. Kenny stood out no matter where he was. Even as kids, he got the same reaction from adults. Rhy always thought Kenny was too beautiful to be as tough as he was.

Rhy cleared his throat to get Mrs. Crawford's eyes back on him. She turned back, her cheeks slightly flushed. Rhy held back the laugh. Apparently, Kenny could even affect the older lady.

"I'll be right back. Why don't you write down the places Mr. Fluffkins would go and grab me more pictures." He passed her a sheet of paper with a pen and got up to go see what Kenny wanted.

He made his way over to Kenny, who smiled at Mrs. Crawford before turning away. They both stepped into the hallway that led to the six separate offices.

"Are we dog catchers now?" Kenny leaned against the wall, staring down at Rhy.

Rhy may have been taller than Dezi, their alpha, but Kenny, the pride's beta, was the tallest. If it wasn't for Dezi being so good at leading, everyone would have easily followed Kenny. But even Kenny had agreed that Dezi was the one who needed to lead them. That decision had been made years ago while they were all still kids with no homes and no families.

During those dark times, they had banded together and made their own family. At first, it had only been Dezi, Kenny, and Rhy. But all too soon, Clyde came along when they were teens, and Cole and Logan coming around six years ago. Now they were a pride of six and all good friends.

"No," Rhy answered.

"Then why are you taking on a job searching for an animal?" Kenny asked.

"First, it's a cat, so your dog catcher remark is null and void. Two, because I'm not about to send a crying old lady out of here. That's bad PR and we need all the good PR we can get. We've seen fewer people walk in here lately."

Kenny sighed. "We are not a pet finding service. If you keep taking charity cases, we won't be able to do anything." Kenny stood straighter. "And don't even deny the charity mark. I guarantee you already decided not to take any money, although you will be out there looking for a house cat."

Rhy didn't deny it; Kenny was right. He shrugged, since there was no point in lying.

Kenny sighed and shook his head at Rhy. "You get one week to find this cat. Then I want you back on real cases." Kenny turned and walked toward his office. Rhy watched until his back disappeared behind a closed door. Rhy ran his fingers through his short red hair. One week to find a black cat. He got the feeling he wasn't going to be getting any sleep anytime soon. He turned around to head back into his office. He was going to find Mrs. Crawford's cat if it killed him.

One week.

He gazed at the door directly across from his. Logan would help him as long as he wasn't busy doing paperwork. Rhy contemplated walking over and asking Logan before telling Mrs. Crawford that two people would work on the case.

He glared harder at the door. If Logan came out in the next ten seconds, then he would ask. If he didn't, then Rhy would ask for forgiveness later. He rushed through the count and smiled as he turned to his door and opened it.

Looked like he and Logan were going cat searching.

Dillan

DILLAN HOPPED ON TOP OF THE BOXES IN THE ALLEY HE'D FOUND HIMSELF IN. He did not understand how he'd gotten there, but nonetheless, his paws hurt, and he felt dirty. He stretched his front paws, clawing at the box as his butt went in the air. He laid down, wishing he was home with Mary-Anne. He missed her so much. He even missed the way she would give him the wrappers to her peppermint candies. He had no interest in the wrappers, but it always seemed to make her happy when he pushed it around.

He placed his head on his front paws. There were always things that confused him. He had grown used to it all by now, but still. Sometimes, Mary-Anne would expect something of him, and he wouldn't be able to deliver.

Sam was never like that. He missed Sam just as much. He'd waited every day by the door, waiting for him to come home, but for the past two years, Sam had never shown back up. At first, Mary-Anne would only lay in bed, crying, but over time, she had picked up on her knitting again and begun keeping up with her soaps once more.

Dillan had just wanted to check the garage for Sam. Mary-Anne used to

always shout for Sam to leave the garage and come in for dinner. So, when the door was left open, Dillan had walked out and went to the garage to look. He had never been there without Sam, but he was determined to bring Sam back into the house.

He went in only to find it empty. No, Sam in sight. No smell of cologne sprayed on too thick with a hint of motor oil. Dillan meowed, something he rarely did. It always got Sam and Mary-Anne's attention. But Sam never came running, no matter how loud he meowed.

Just as Dillan had been leaving the garage and heading for the house, barking had alerted him to the dog that was running toward him at breakneck speed. Dillan hadn't stopped to think. He ran as fast as he could. He'd thought he was heading toward the house, but when he'd finally lost the dog, he'd been somewhere else entirely.

He wished he could communicate with other animals. He had tried multiple times to talk to other cats, but all they did was meow or hiss at him. He had long figured out he was different from other cats. Like the fact that he could understand humans so well but not other felines.

Sam had understood that about him. Mary-Anne had named him Mr. Fluffkins, but Dillan had hated the name as soon as it was given to him. Sam had taken him to the garage while he worked on some woodwork. He had spoken to Dillan as if he was a person, and Dillan enjoyed those chats the most. He would respond when he knew he should, and all too soon, Sam had given him the name Dillan. Said it was their secret, that he needed a name that dignified him, because he was too smart to be called Mr. Fluffkins.

Memories of his home and the loving older couple flooded him all at once. He curled in on himself, wishing he was home. His stomach tightened, reminding him he hadn't eaten since the morning he got lost. He had no idea how to get food. There was trash that was filled with food, and all the other cats seemed to dig food out of there. His stomach turned with repulsion from the idea. No matter how hungry he was, he couldn't fathom eating trash. He

wanted some of Mary-Anne's fish soup. He licked his lips, remembering how savory and delicious the soup was.

Dillan closed his eyes. He had been walking around for so long. His paws ached, not used to the pavement. Trash cans suddenly fell, alerting Dillan. He stood quickly, looking over to the entrance of the alley. A man stood there, half-drunk by the smell of booze that wafted off him. He staggered, hitting the metal trash cans, knocking them over and spilling all the trash. It made the alleyway stink even more. Dillan scrunched his nose, sneezing from the stench.

"Who's there?" the man shouted.

Dillan stood still. It didn't matter though. The man walked right toward him. Well, more zigzagged. He ran into every obstacle possible, cursing under his breath. The closer he got to Dillan the more Dillan thought of running away.

It was too late. A hand stretched out and wrapped around his side before he could do more than think of running.

Claws out, he attempted to scratch the man's face. The stranger pulled back, right before Dillan's claws connected with flesh.

"Whoa there."

The man's alcohol-drenched breath had Dillan gagging. He lifted his paw to cover his nose.

"I bet she would stop bitching at me if I brought you home."

Dillan had no idea what the man was talking about, but he was sure that the stranger wasn't going to take him back to Mary-Anne's house. He tried to squirm out of the stranger's hold, but the drunk man held him tight. There was no wiggle room. Once again, Dillan tried to claw the man, but to no avail. He couldn't quite get close enough.

"Little feisty, aren't we?"

Dillan wanted to show the stranger just how feisty his claws could be against his face.

The stranger looked around the alley. "There we go," he said right before he shoved Dillan into a box.

As soon as the hands left him, Dillan tried to jump and run. Before he could get even a paw out of the box, the stranger closed the flaps over his head, knocking Dillan back into the box.

Dillan grumbled and started to claw at the box. It was a little wet in one of the corners. He focused on the weak spot and started to dig at it, tearing a hole. The night's crisp air came through. He just needed to make the hole big enough for him to escape. So far, only his paw wiggled out. He continued to claw at the box when he heard the screeching sound of an old car door opening. He was tossed about, flipping over, before he landed. Dillan lay on his back with his feet in the air and his tail over his face. The sound of an engine starting told him he was out of time for an escape.

Dillan huffed, blowing his tail out of his face. He moved around, looking for the hole he had made. The idiot was going to drive while drunk, so Dillan needed to get out of the car as soon as possible. Dillan had watched plenty of TV where the person who drank and drove not only put themselves in danger but others. The idiot was willing to take that chance.

Dillan found the hole, but where air and the outside world used to be was now blocked by carpet. Dillan groaned as he scratched at the seat, but there was no way he could scratch past the seat.

The car still hadn't moved when the sound of a phone ringing went off.

"Ugh, again," the man complained.

Dillan listened in on the conversation, hoping someone was calling to stop him from driving and ending both of their lives.

"I said I'm on my way," he shouted.

Dillan cringed from the harsh tone. He could only hear a little, but he could definitely hear crying from the other side of the line.

"Karen, you don't have to cry." There was a pause, then barely audible words passed all the crying. "I only had three beers with the guys.

Dillan rolled his eyes. There was no way he had only drank three beers. He smelled like he drank the whole bar and then rolled in the empty glasses and cans.

"Fine, but you better not take forever. It's freezing."

There was no more talking, and the keys jingled as the car engine turned off. Dillan sighed in relief, and he went back to staring at the covered hole and contemplated using his mouth. He wanted to throw up at the thought of putting his mouth on the box. He did not understand what had been in it exactly, but it smelled of rotten food and the garbage in the alley. So putting it in his mouth was out of the question.

The box moved side to side, jostling Dillan. He stuck his claws in the bottom, so he wouldn't end up on his back again.

"Come on, kitty. She's here."



RHY WAITED UNTIL LOGAN TOOK A FEW SIPS FROM HIS COFFEE.

Everyone had learned early that when Logan had coffee in his hands it was best to give him a few minutes to enjoy it before talking to him. Logan was the smallest out of all of them, but they had all watched when he had put Clyde on his back, all because he had asked him a question before he took a sip of his coffee. It soon became a rule not to talk to Logan until he was finished.

"What do you want? You've been hovering for the past three minutes," Logan said.

"Just making sure you drank enough coffee," he muttered.

Logan side-eyed him. "I can never drink enough coffee. But something tells me I'm going to need more than this twenty-ounce cup for whatever bullshit you're about to tell me."

Rhy smiled and pulled his hand from behind his back, handing over another cup of coffee. "We are going cat searching," he announced, just as Logan's hand curved around the offered cup.

"What?" The look on Logan's face was comical. His eyes squinted, and

his small nose scrunched up.

Rhy opened his mouth to explain about Mrs. Crawford and her dead husband and the cat she loved, but Logan put one of the cups of coffee down to put his hand up, stopping him before he could say anything.

"Let me guess: somebody came to you with some sob story, and you're helping them. And not only are you helping them, but it's for free."

"I did bring you coffee," Rhy reminded him.

Logan sighed and took a sip of the coffee Rhy had brought him. Rhy knew he had him when Logan practically moaned after one sip.

"Fine, I will help you, but you owe me two more cups of this stuff." Logan drank more of the coffee. "One day, you're going to tell me where you get this coffee from. I can never find it. It's so fucking good."

Rhy smiled. "If I told you, how would I ever be able to bribe you into helping me?"

Logan drank more of the coffee, leaving the other cup he had behind and headed toward Rhy's office. "Come on and show me a picture of the cat we have to look for."

Rhy nodded, and they went into his office, and he pulled out all twenty-seven photos Mrs. Crawford left with him. They all were taken at different times and from different angles, so she refused to take some of them with her. She said they would be of better use to Rhy finding Mr. Fluffkins.

"Holy shit. Are there enough photos?" Logan remarked.

"Mrs. Crawford really loves her cat; said it's like a child to her."

Logan picked up the photo with the younger-looking Crawfords with the kitten. "How old is this cat?"

Rhy looked over to the picture. "She said they got him about eighteen years ago."

"And it's still alive?" Logan's eyes widened with surprise.

Rhy hadn't thought about it, but it was a long time for the cat to be alive.

"Did you think maybe it left its owner to die alone? You know animals do

that."

Rhy picked up the most recent picture of the cat. There was no grey hair that was visible in the photo. "I don't think so." He passed the photo over to Logan. "That cat looks young."

Logan looked at the photo, his eyes squinting with concentration.

"If you focus any harder on the picture, the cat might jump out at you," Rhy joked.

"You've been hanging out with Dezi too much. That was a shit joke." Logan handed the photo back to him. "So where to first?"

Rhy scratched his head. "Mrs. Crawford said Mr. Fluffkins isn't an outside cat. He stays indoors, and only went out when her now-deceased husband took him to the garage."

Logan coughed, choking on the coffee he'd just sipped. "Did you say 'Fluffkins'?"

Rhy groaned. "Yes, that's the cat's name."

Logan laughed. "Shit, are you sure the cat didn't run away? I'd run away with a name like that."

Rhy side-eyed him. "You are pretty fluffy. Maybe I can get the guys on board for a new nickname for you."

Logan glared at him. "I dare any of you, and I will shift to claw your fucking eyes out. Don't test me."

Rhy laughed. He knew how wild Logan could be when shifted to his lynx form. "Fine, I get it; you're one wild animal that shouldn't be fucked with." Rhy grabbed two of the photos from his desk. "You ready to go?"

Logan nodded and drank more of his coffee. Rhy watched as Logan's eyes closed and another moan escaped his lips. Rhy wasn't a coffee drinker, but Logan made coffee seem as if it was a godsend. He drank the stuff as if he was always lacking sleep, and he needed coffee to be able to function.

"So, we have a missing cat that never goes outside, and no place to look for him," Logan summed up.

Rhy nodded. "Pretty much. We can start at Mrs. Crawford's house, but I have a feeling she searched high and low already."

Logan sighed a big breath that smelled a lot like coffee. "All right, well, I'm guessing she asked her neighbors already?"

Rhy nodded. He'd asked her, and she had said she went to every house on her block.

"Well, I guess we are going to the scene of the crime first and hope we find something." Logan finished the coffee before tossing it in Rhy's trash can. "Lead the way, big guy."

Rhy looked to the trash can then back to Logan. "You sure you don't have to use the bathroom?"

One of Logan's eyebrows went up. "No, mom, I don't have to take a tinkle. Now can we go?"

Rhy laughed. "You sure? You drank a twenty-ounce cup, and I'm pretty sure it's not your first coffee in the past hour," Rhy commented.

Logan rolled his eyes. "Thanks for keeping track, but if I have to pee, I'll let you know. Now come on."



IT WAS LATE, and Rhy hoped Mrs. Crawford hadn't gone to bed. The darkness wouldn't get in their way of searching, since they both had great night vision, but Rhy rang the doorbell to Mrs. Crawford's ranch style home anyway. He heard movement on the other side and knew Mrs. Crawford was rushing to open the door. He was right; within a few seconds, a red-eyed Mrs. Crawford was standing in the doorway with a tissue in hand and fresh tears leaking from her eyes.

"Hi, Mrs. Crawford. This is Logan, the man I told you about that will help me find Mr. Fluffkins. We wanted to check around here first before going further out."

Mrs. Crawford nodded. She pressed the tissue to her eyes before stepping back to allow them both into the house. "I just put some tea on, would either one of you like a cup?"

Rhy turned to Logan, but he shook his head and went to check out the small living room that was to the right of the foyer, starting the search for the cat.

Rhy turned to look at Mrs. Crawford. "No, ma'am."

She nodded. "I'll be in the kitchen if either one of you needs anything."

Rhy smiled at her, nodding his understanding. She hobbled in the direction Rhy guessed the kitchen was located. He turned his attention back to Logan and the small living room they were standing in.

"This cat lived a life of leisure," Logan commented. He picked up the large cat bed that looked freshly washed.

Rhy rolled his eyes. It was a cat—he was sure they all lived lives of luxury. Logan brought the bed up to his nose, getting the scent of the cat. Rhy left him to it and went in search of the dining room. He looked under the old oak table. Three chairs sat at the table. He looked to one chair that had stacks of old phone books on the seat.

Mrs. Crawford wasn't kidding when she'd said that her cat was like her child. The pictures on the wall, the multiple cat beds in every room, and the place setting at the table all indicated that they treated him more like a human than a cat.

"Hey, Rhy," Logan called out.

Rhy turned from inspecting behind the china cabinet, and Logan stared at the table setting but didn't say anything about it.

"Something smells funny." Logan still held the cat bed he'd been smelling, but along with it was a small knitted sweater.

"Funny how?" Rhy asked.

Logan closed his eyes, and his face scrunched in concentration. "It's hard to say, but I know it's off."

"I need a little bit more than 'off'," Rhy said.

Logan shrugged. "Well, that's all I got for you."

Rhy rubbed his temples. "Okay, then we'll note that for later. Did you find anything that's useful?"

Logan smiled at him. "Besides the fact this cat lives a better life than me?" His hands went up as he shrugged. "Not really."

Rhy sighed. He knew it had been a stretch, thinking the cat would still be in the home. "Let's check the rest of the rooms first before calling it clear."

Logan nodded and went to search the remainder of the house. Rhy's eyes traveled around the room once more, double checking. He didn't see any black fur and heard nothing else besides Logan moving things in the house and Mrs. Crawford crying softly in the kitchen. He hoped he was able to find her cat. Rhy walked out of the dining room, down the hallway, and stopped at the first door. He heard Logan in the room right next to the one he'd stopped at. "Did you check this one?"

"No," Logan answered.

He hated home checks. It felt like an invasion of privacy. He walked around a stranger's home and looked behind their belongings and looked for clues.

Rhy opened the door and walked into the room, the lights turned off. He didn't need to turn the lights on, since his tiger vision worked fine in the dark. He moved around the room with ease. It was a bedroom, but there was barely anything in the room other than a bed. He would have thought it was Mrs. Crawford's room, but the lack of mothballs and mint scent led him to believe it was someone else's.

He sniffed the air. The scent was stale but something lingered there. He tried to concentrate on the smell, trying to place it. The more he smelled the more the scent bothered him.

"Why are you hard?" Logan whispered.

Rhy's eyes opened in surprise. He didn't need to look down to confirm

Logan's accusation, since he could feel it. His cock was firmly pressed against the zipper of his pants. He moved to adjust himself. He didn't have an answer for why he was hard. He was just as confused as Logan sounded.

"I checked the master bedroom. No sign of the cat." Logan's eyes scanned up Rhy's body.

Rhy nodded, getting himself under control. "Okay, the garage is the last place we need to check."

Logan nodded, but the look he gave Rhy was filled with worry. He didn't want to talk about it. He didn't know what had happened or why his body was reacting in that manner. They both walked out of the room just as Mrs. Crawford came down the hall. They stopped short of running the old lady over.

"Sorry, boys." She smiled up at them. "That's his room."

Rhy looked back in the room with just a bed in it. "Mr. Fluffkins?" Rhy confirmed.

She nodded. "Yeah, he loved his room." Fresh tears fell down her face.

Logan tensed next to Rhy; he knew his friend was a little uncomfortable around others when they cried. Rhy placed his hand on Mrs. Crawford's shoulder. "It's okay; we'll do everything we can to bring him back to you."

Mrs. Crawford seemed to draw strength from Rhy's words.

"Can we have food for him or maybe some of his favorite treats?"

Mrs. Crawford nodded and went back the way she'd come. "I'll go get it now. I made a batch earlier this morning before coming to your office."

"So, we try and find the cat with food?" Logan sounded skeptical

They moved out of the cat's room, Rhy shutting the door to the smell that had him reacting strangely. They moved over to the front of the house, standing by the door. Rhy wanted out of the house. He had himself under control, but he didn't want the reaction to happen again, especially not in front of poor Mrs. Crawford.

Rhy shrugged. "Do you have a better plan?"

Logan opened his mouth only to shut it just as Mrs. Crawford walked back over to them. She handed over a large Tupperware bowl. Rhy opened it and was instantly hit with the warm scent of chocolate chip cookies.

"Those smell amazing," Logan said.

Rhy could practically see the drool the cookie smell was creating. He closed the Tupperware and moved it away from Logan's reach. He turned back to Mrs. Crawford, and she handed them another bag.

"I made a bag for you boys."

In a flurry of motion, Logan grabbed the bag from Mrs. Crawford's hands. He had it clutched to his chest as he said thank you.

"I should be thanking you two more. You're the ones out looking for Mr. Fluffkins." Her eyes watered with new tears.

"I will keep in touch if we find anything," Rhy said.

They walked out of the house with promises to update her if either of them heard anything. They made it all the way to the car before Logan brought up the one conversation Rhy was hoping he'd leave alone.

"So, want to tell me why you got a hard-on in an old lady's house?"

Rhy groaned, his hands tightening around the steering wheel. "No," Rhy grunted out.

"No, you don't want to talk about it, or no, y—"

"Drop it, Logan," Rhy said. He didn't want to discuss his body's odd reaction.

"Fine, we won't talk about it, but you have to agree it wa—"

"Logan," Rhy growled.

Logan sighed, but Rhy heard no more about it. Logan ate the chocolate chip cookies as they headed back to the office. How the hell were they supposed to find a cat dangling chocolate chip cookies? Could cats even eat chocolate chip cookies? And what was that scent?

Rhy glared at the road as if it had the answers he was looking for. As if it would lead him right to the cat, and then all questions would be solved.

Logan moaned. "These would be my favorite treat too. Shit, Mrs. Crawford outdid herself, these are amazing."

Rhy rolled his eyes. Great, so if Logan went missing, they just needed Mrs. Crawford's chocolate chip cookies to find him.

Dillan

HOW THE HELL HAD HE GOTTEN HIMSELF INTO THE MESS HE WAS IN? ALEX was a piece-of-shit boyfriend, and Karen seemed to be naive beyond reason. She was even worse than the women on the Spanish soaps Mary-Anne watched sometimes. The whole car ride Dillan tried to escape the torturous box, listening to them argue. Well, more of Alex yelling and Karen sobbing. He had wanted to claw Alex's face up before, but it was quickly becoming one of his top goals. Claw Alex's face up, then find a way back home.

Keeping his priorities in order.

The car had long since stopped, and once again, he was jostled around. They carried him around as if he was just a box of crayons, shaking him needlessly.

The top flaps of the box opened, and Dillan saw his chance. Dillan swiped at the hand that reached into the box, making the stranger drop the box. Dillan moved fast; he was out of the box and heading toward the door to freedom. Karen, the woman who had picked them up and saved Dillan from death, shut the door before he could escape.

"You don't want to go out there; it's too cold. Why don't I fix you some

tuna?"

Way to stereotype. Dillan had long ago found out he didn't like tuna. It was better than the dried kibble that smelled of cardboard and fish, but he didn't eat it. He liked sandwiches, spaghetti, Mary-Anne's fish soup, and pancakes. Oh, how he would kill for some pancakes. Dillan didn't like tuna, but he was so hungry his stomach growled at the thought of eating something. It would be better than air, and he wasn't going to eat trash, no matter how hungry he got.

"Damn cat," Alex said.

Dillan scratched at the door, indicating he wanted to leave. He would rather be outside where Mary-Anne could possibly find him, instead of in some stranger's apartment. Plus, the apartment smelled just as bad as Alex did. More reason to get out of there as soon as possible. If only one of them would open the door.

"It's probably scared," Karen said.

Alex huffed and flipped him off. If Dillan had fingers, he would return the favor. Instead, he glared at Alex, daring him to get close. This time, Dillan wouldn't miss his face; he would scratch Alex to ribbons.

"It's fucking glaring at me."

Karen turned before heading to the kitchen. "You're overthinking it."

"I say we throw it back outside, and let it freeze to death."

Karen gasped, and Dillan nodded yes. He wanted out. He wouldn't freeze to death—he had fur, and he was sure he could find a warm place to sleep.

"You brought the cat in here, so it's a part of our family now," she pleaded.

Dillan shook his head no; he wasn't a part of their family. He was a part of Mary-Anne and Sam's family, and that was it. He needed to go. He was sure Mary-Anne was having a difficult time with him gone. Especially since Sam was no longer around. Dillan hoped Sam came home soon so Mary-Anne wouldn't be so lonely. Dillan did everything he could to make sure

Mary-Anne was busy, but there were always times that he would hear her cry out for Sam.

He wanted to go home so bad that it hurt. He turned back to the door and tried jumping up to the door handle. If he turned it a certain way, maybe he could get out.

"Look, he wants to get out there. Just let him out, and I'll get you a new cat," Alex said.

"He wants out, because you keep acting like you hate him."

Yes, he wanted to get away from Alex, but mostly, he wanted out of the house so he could try and find his way home. He hoped they hadn't taken him too far. He was sure he was already far away from home, but now he had no idea if it was even walking distance.

He stopped trying to escape and turned to look at his abductors. One of them had to have a phone with a GPS on it. He knew his address from looking at the mail. Thank goodness Mary-Anne read to him; he had picked up reading pretty easily.

"See, he stopped scratching at the door. You just have to stop insulting him," Karen remarked. She went to the kitchen. "Do you want some dinner while I'm in here?"

Alex glared at Dillan. Dillan decided that he would steal his phone when escaping. He sat there in front of the door to the apartment and glared back at Alex while he sat on the brown sofa.

Karen walked back in the room with the tuna. Dillan, repulsed by the smell, saw it was still in the can, so he knew it was cold. He wondered if she even bothered to check the expiration date. He was sure it smelled off and had to be expired. Dillan pushed the can away. He wasn't so hungry he would eat bad tuna.

"Snooty fucking cat," Alex said.

Sam would have smacked Alex in the back of the head for speaking so crudely in front of a lady. Sam had said that bad language in front of a lady

wasn't gentleman like, but in the garage—where he tended to mess up or hurt himself—curse words were fine. Dillan used to laugh at Sam's antics. It seemed like so many things reminded him of Sam. He never realized how big Sam was until he wasn't there anymore.

Until he was no longer snoring so loudly that even the neighbors complained. They hadn't complained in a very long time.

Dillan laid down in front of the door. His heart heavy, he placed his head on his paws and just rested there. He would wait for them to fall asleep before escaping.



THREE HOURS it took them to finally go to bed. Karen had called it a night, saying she'd needed to be to work thirty minutes ago, but Alex had stayed out on the sofa with the TV still on. Dillan got up and moved toward the sofa. The closer he got to Alex, the more beer cans he had to step around. How in the world Alex could still be drinking after he had been drunk already was a mystery to Dillan.

Luckily, Alex had left his phone on the sofa next to him instead of in his pocket. Less work for Dillan. He grabbed the phone, turning it on. He groaned silently at seeing that it was locked. Of course, Alex kept his phone locked. There was no way Dillan would be able to guess the passcode.

The phone looked just like the one Jamie had; he was one of the kids in the neighborhood who always came over to Sam and Mary-Anne's. Jamie used his thumb to unlock his phone. Dillan looked to the phone and back to Alex's thumb, the remote sitting limply in his open hand.

Dillan rolled his eyes. His life just couldn't be simple. He pushed the phone closer to Alex's hand. He had no idea how he was going to do it without waking Alex. He just hoped Alex was a heavy sleeper like Sam. Paws crossed, he moved the remote from Alex's hand slowly. He made sure

to keep his focus on any little changes in the way Alex was breathing. He got the remote and put it to the side of him, and Alex hadn't twitched.

Dillan grabbed the phone with his paws, hoping that it wouldn't slip from between his paws and fall to the floor. It would make too much noise. Dillan moved with precision. If he was capable of sweating, he was sure he would've created a puddle by now. He slipped the phone into Alex's hand. He waited for a few breaths, listening to Alex's heart and breathing. Everything stayed the same. Dillan sighed a breath of relief.

He pushed Alex's thumb down on the button; the screen came on, and he was in the phone in seconds. Now he just needed to get it *out* of Alex's hand. Dillan took the phone and went to the door, holding the device in his mouth. He didn't want to think about the places the phone had been. He needed out and a map, so he would have to make the sacrifice. When he made it home safe and sound, he would eat fifty of the catmints Mary-Anne had bought him.

He stared at the door that was clearly locked. He didn't let that set him back, moving to the kitchen. There he found a small window above the sink. Dillan jumped up on the counter. If Mary-Anne ever saw him on the counter, he would get the dreaded spray bottle. He didn't mind water, but he loathed freezing cold water sprayed at him.

He walked over a few dirty dishes to the window. The latch was turned to the unlocked side. Dillan put the phone down and tried to open the window. He knew how to open a window, but it was still hard.

He had just gotten it open a crack when his back paw slipped, and he crashed into the dishes. It was like slow motion, like on the TV when the movie slowed down to let you watch every second of the action; that was how Dillan felt. He saw everything happening in slow motion, and he couldn't do anything about it to change it.

The bowls and plates fell, some in the sink and others crashed to the floor. Dillan landed on the side of the sink. He knew his captor would be up

now. He scrambled to open the window enough for him to escape, pushing with all his might. He heard movement just as he got the window open enough for him to squeeze through.

"What the fuck?" Alex shouted.

Dillan grabbed the phone in his mouth and squeezed through the gap in the window.

"Oh no, you don't." Alex ran toward him, and Dillan wiggled and struggled to get past the window. He made it to the ledge just as Alex made it to the window. Alex's hand came out, and Dillan had no choice but to jump. He leaped to the side. Alex's hand ripped fur from his tail, and Dillan yelped in pain. He thought he had leapt in time. He landed on his paws on the ground, happy that the apartment was only on the second floor. His paws still stung, but it was more from shock of an impact than actual damage.

"You fucking cat! Stay right there—I'm coming to get you," Alex said menacingly.

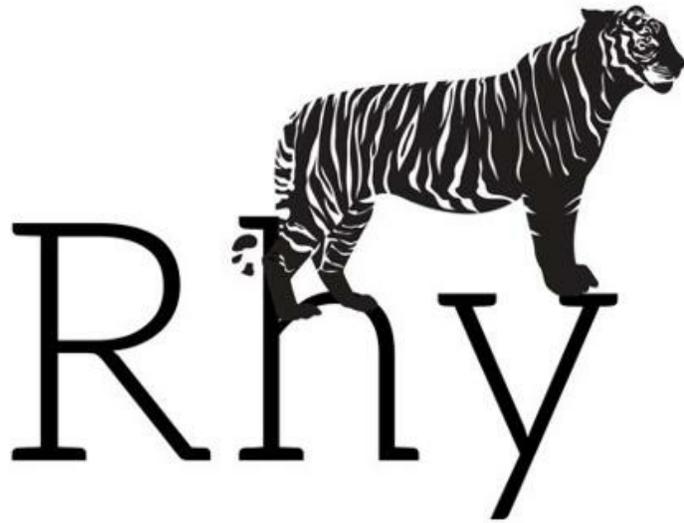
Dillan ran from the back of the apartments and crossed the street. He couldn't run as fast as he wanted with the phone dangling from his mouth. He heard Alex yelling behind him, but he didn't turn back to see; he just kept running. He ran until he no longer could hear Alex, and then he ran more until his legs cried from exhaustion, and his lungs burned with an intensity he had never felt.

He dropped the phone from his mouth. His breath created thick clouds in the cold air as he gasped for air. He was exhausted. He sat there for a second longer before turning the phone over. Luckily, the phone hadn't timed out and turned off. Dillan hit the map icon and typed in his address. It took him four tries, but he finally got it. He made sure to hit the walk button. He would like a car ride, but he wasn't taking the chance of someone else taking him home.

He would have to make it back to Mary-Anne's on his own four paws. The phone said that it would take one hour by car, but walking would take one day and fifty minutes.

He sighed. Of course, he was only an hour away from home, but it would take over twenty-four hours to get back.

He hit the green *Go* button, picked the phone back up, and headed in the direction the phone indicated. It was going to be the longest trip of his life. It would also top as the worst trip—worse even than the road trip with Sam when he'd eaten a whole can of beans.



RHY WOKE WITH A START, HAVING BEEN PLAGUED WITH NOTHING BUT BAD dreams. He tried to remember exactly what the dreams were about, but it was a foggy haze of fear and pain. He hadn't had nightmares in years.

Rhy got out of bed, flinging the damp sheet from his sweat-slicked skin. He stood and stripped his bed. Rhy would need a shower after how much he'd sweated. He took the sheets and threw them in the hamper before walking over to the bathroom. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. The five o'clock shadow made him look tired and rugged.

Rhy eyed the razor, but in the end, decided against it. His usually bright green eyes looked dull and tired. His red hair a mess on top of his head. He ran his fingers through it, trying to finger comb it. He gave up after a few tries. He looked as if he hadn't gotten any sleep. Rhy felt it too. He turned away from the mirror, tired of seeing his own exhaustion looking back at him.

Rhy walked over to his glass-paneled shower and turned it on. He set it to the hottest he could stand. He went to the bathroom as the water heated up. With winter in full swing, the pipes tended to freeze or take longer to warm

up. Rhy stuck his hand under the spray of water, letting the warmth seep through him. It was close enough, though it was still freezing cold. Getting into the shower, letting the jets of water beat against his muscles. The water got hotter, helping him relax his tense muscles. He turned his back to the spray, letting it beat against him. A sigh of relief pulled from his lips, the tension melting away.

Rhy once again tried to remember what his nightmare was about or why he even had one. He'd never had a pet cat or even grandparents, so there was nothing about the case that should have brought back any bad memories or caused any nightmares.

He reached over to grab his body wash, squirted the blue gel into his hands, and started lathering his skin. Rhy closed his eyes and relaxed, enjoying the shower and letting it wash away his fatigue.

Without even thinking about it, his hand traveled down his body. A scent in his memory wrapped around him. His cock hardened instantly, his length aching to be touched. He kept his eyes closed, and he didn't think too hard about what he was doing or the fact he was doing it.

Rhy wrapped his hand around his cock, stroking it lightly. He avoided the head, drawing out his pleasure. It was like he was standing in the room with the enticing smell. It made his balls heavy with need. He groaned. He had wanted to rub himself against the bed. Mark the room with his scent. His feline side agreed. He needed to go back to the room and roll around and spread his scent all over. There wouldn't be any mistaking that he had been there.

The thought of doing just that had Rhy moaning. Head back, water washing over the front of him as he roared his release, painting the walls of the shower. In his mind, it wasn't the shower that he released his seed on; instead, it would be the bed in the room. No, it would be the person laying on the bed.

Rhy opened his eyes and stared at the wall in confusion. There was no

person, just a cat. It all confused him. He shook his head and cleaned off the wall before finishing up his shower.

Just as he got out, he heard his phone ringing. Rhy moved back into the room, grabbing his phone from his nightstand and unplugging it from the charger.

He answered it, pressing the phone to his face. "Yeah?"

"Any luck finding your cat?" Kenny's smooth voice asked over the phone.

"It's not my cat, and it's been less than twenty-four hours," Rhy reminded him. He moved to his dresser, and grabbed a pair of dark denim jeans and a plain olive-green shirt. White shirts made his freckles stand out in a bad way, but the green made his eyes pop. At least, that's what Logan had told him. He was inclined to believe him.

"Hmm, well, any leads on it yet?"

Rhy rolled his eyes. He sat the phone down as he put his head through his shirt. He grabbed his phone, pressing it back to his ear. "No leads yet," he said, emphasizing the *yet* part.

There was a sigh on the other end, but Rhy had grown used to Kenny's sighs. It usually meant Kenny had something else for Rhy to do, but he knew Rhy would keep doing the other job and try to juggle both at once, ultimately failing and getting burned out.

"What is it, Kenny?" Rhy asked.

"Nothing, I'll get Cole on it. But as soon as your week is up or you find this cat, you are on the next job. Cole and Klyde both have been picking up the other jobs."

Rhy felt bad. "I can do more than one job."

Kenny sighed. "Yeah, usually I would agree, but Logan said that you've been a little more obsessed about this job. You didn't call it a night till three this morning."

It wasn't a question, so Rhy didn't treat it like one. He thought he had found the cat multiple times, but each time, it had turned out to be a stray.

And each time, he was filled with disappointment, as if it was his own personal pet that had gotten lost and not just some job. It bothered him, and honestly, he wouldn't have gone home if it hadn't been for Logan being with him. He had contemplated taking Logan home and staying to keep searching. Maybe a few of the alleyways downtown. The cat may be sleeping there. Mrs. Crawford was only a few blocks from downtown. It wouldn't be a far reach.

"Rhy," Kenny called out.

Rhy shook his head clear. His every thought had been taken over by the burning need to find Mr. Fluffkins. He still didn't care for the name, but fuck, where the hell was the cat?

"Rhy," Kenny shouted over the phone again.

Rhy pulled the phone back and rubbed his ear. He brought it back up to his other ear. "Yeah?" Rhy replied.

"What the hell, Rhy?" Kenny questioned.

"Sorry, did you say something else?"

Kenny went quiet on the other side of the line. Rhy got the distinct feeling that his friend wasn't thinking about places the cat could be.

"You sure you're okay?" Kenny asked worriedly.

Rhy sighed. He could lie, but what good would it do? As soon as he went to the office, they would all probably see it all over his face. He was far from okay. He'd gotten hardly any sleep last night, and his thoughts were filled with finding a cat. Not to mention what happened at Mrs. Crawford's house and again in his shower. He was practically losing his mind.

"I don't know," he finally answered.

Kenny sighed deeply. "Do you need Logan to take over the case, so you can get your shit together?"

"No," Rhy shouted. He probably didn't need to shout, but just the thought of no longer being able to find the cat hurt him in a way that wasn't normal.

"You su—"

"Don't worry, I can handle this. If you need more hands, you can take Logan," Rhy suggested.

There was silence, and for a second, Rhy feared Kenny would demand that he hand the case over to Logan. Rhy wouldn't want to, and he didn't want to challenge his beta. They were friends and the respect was mutual, but he felt it deep down: if Kenny took him off, he would go behind his back to find the cat. He didn't know why he felt so strongly about it, but he knew that he would even challenge Dezi about the matter.

"Logan will continue to help you," Kenny said.

Rhy sighed with relief, his shoulders falling as all the tension left his body.

"Rhy, remember we agreed on a week. If the cat isn't found then..."

Kenny didn't have to say anymore; Rhy knew that they would tell him to let it go. And he would agree, but there was a burning inside of him that demanded that he find the cat at any cost.

"Don't worry, I'm going to find it," Rhy said reassuringly.

With that, they were off the phone, and Rhy stood there looking down at his bed, searching for the answers as to where he should go in order to find the cat. He needed to find him before the end of the week.

He grabbed his coat and left his apartment. The bed wasn't going to give him answers. He could only do one thing: search on foot.

Dillian



DREAD AND FEAR COURSED THROUGH HIM, GUNSHOTS AND SCREAMS FILLING THE air, hands shoving him into a dark room so small his body needed to curl in on itself. More shouts and pleading penetrated the wall. Hot tears rushed down his face, hands gripping around his legs tightly as he cried and tried to stay silent. His body trembled in the small space, his head pressing into his knees, making him smaller, wishing to be invisible.

The screams stopped, and there were no more gunshots. The door flung open, filling the dark space with bright light. Rough, calloused hands grab him by the neck and shake.

Words he can't understand are screamed at him, so he keeps his eyes cast down, only dark leather boots in his view, blurred by his tears. Screams and shouts go off in the room as he's dangled in the air by the man's hand. A bloodied woman walked over to him and grabs him from the man's hand. His face is pressed against her chest, wet, hot blood covering his face as he trembled in the woman's arms. He could smell the coppery scent that accompanied blood, but under all the fear and blood was the calming scent of lilies. A scent he would never forget; the one that always calmed him. Her

hands were shaking, but she tried to soothe him by running her fingers through his hair.

A prick on his arm had his eyes closing. He feared for the woman; she was hurt, and there was too much blood. He looked into her blue eyes speckled with silver. There was a smile on her face as she told him to sleep. Tears streamed down her face as she whispered words he couldn't hear or understand.

Dillan woke from his dream, his body trembling with lingering fear. He looked around to make sure he wasn't in the dark room or the man from the dream hadn't appeared. His heart beat so hard and fast. His eyes scanned his surroundings.

He had fallen asleep in a park in a box someone had left with a bunch of newspapers inside. It wasn't as comfortable as his bed back home, but it was pleasant enough. It kept him warm and gave him somewhere to rest his tired paws.

He shook himself free of the remaining fear from the dream. He hated the nightmare. It didn't make any sense. In the dream, he was always in the human body of little boy. It always felt more of a memory than a dream, but he was a cat, so it couldn't be possible. It had been a long time since he'd had a terrible dream. After a year with Sam and Mary-Anne, he had stopped getting them. Now, out there in the cold and lost, he was once again plagued with the horrifying torment of his sleeping thoughts.

Dillan moved some newspapers to find the phone. He hit the button on the side to turn it on. He couldn't unlock the phone, but the map still showed on the screen. He looked to the right corner where the battery icon clearly stated ten percent. He would take it as far as he could. Dillan grabbed the phone with his teeth and jumped out of the box.

Still early, the sun was just beginning to rise. He stretched before shaking out each leg. His paws screamed for him to rest for a little while longer, but with the phone dying, he needed to cover as much ground as possible. He just

hoped he got close enough that he would recognize a few things and be able to find himself near his home.



DILLAN DROPPED the phone as his legs gave out, and he flopped down to the ground. He was just too far away. He hit the button to light the screen up. He was down to three percent and still had sixteen hours and twenty-two minutes. He lay on the side of the road in the grass. It wasn't a major highway; the map seemed to take him down back roads that were mainly dirt and lacked cars. Which was better for Dillan. He would hate to be run over. He had walked across plenty of dead animals.

His stomach tightened and growled with hunger pains. Someone had tossed a half-eaten apple, but Dillan had turned away from it and kept walking. He was regretting not eating it as his stomach once again tightened with pain.

He rested for a few seconds before forcing himself up once more. He picked the phone up and began to walk in the direction it indicated. He needed to go straight for another ten miles. By the time he got home—if he made it—the pads of his paws would be torn, and he might not walk for a month. He was probably being overly dramatic, but he was just so very tired and wanted to sleep.

He thought about the chocolate chip cookies and delicious dinner Mary-Anne would make for him. His walking turned into a trot before he was once again running as fast as he could. With the phone in his mouth, he couldn't go as fast as he needed. But he had to cover as much land as he could before the phone died on him.



DILLAN MADE it to a small town. He knew he lived in a small town, but the air smelled different and the phone had said he still had thirteen hours to go, so he knew he wasn't near home yet.

A tantalizing smell filled the air, and he let his nose lead him as his mouth filled with saliva.

He ran into a wall.

He shook his head, staring at a red brick wall. He backed up until he saw the letters painted on the building. He studied the words and sounded them out in his head. Grandma Betty's Family Kitchen was clearly written on the wall. The smell of fresh cinnamon rolls and maple bacon made Dillan's stomach growl.

He walked over to the door, hoping to get in. The food smelled so good. The wooden door opened just as he sped up. Dillan dashed inside before anyone caught him. He made his way over to the area where the smell was the strongest. He was aware that the place was practically empty, but his mind was set on the food. If he could eat, maybe he would have the energy to figure out another way back home. He might need to steal another phone.

He made it all the way to a door that was labeled kitchen; he pushed the door open. If he thought the smell was strong, he was knocked over by how good everything smelled in there. He drooled as he walked farther into the kitchen. So distracted by the smell of food, he forgot that he was supposed to be sneaking around.

A scream snapped him out of his transfixed thoughts. He turned to see a large woman with a broom in her hand coming toward him. Dillan ran for his life. People shouted in the kitchen as the woman continued to chase him with the broom.

"Get that cat," she shouted.

All the people in the kitchen stopped moving out of the way and began to chase him around. He jumped onto the counter. It would have upset Mary-Anne if she'd seen how he put his dirty paws on the counter without washing

them. Good thing she wasn't there as he ran around, jumping from counter to counter.

He went past the cinnamon rolls and stopped to try to grab one just as the broom came crashing down next to him.

"You thieving cat." She glared at Dillan, sending him the evil eye. She lifted the broom once more, and Dillan ran the opposite way with the cinnamon roll in his mouth.

He ran right into a net.

His legs went through the holes, and he tried to move around to get out, but it only seemed to tangle him further in the net.

"Take that feral thing outside," the woman instructed.

Dillan hissed at her as he was carried off. He looked down to see the cinnamon bun he had stolen on the floor. Wasted. His stomach clenched with hunger. He grumbled as he was carried back outside.

Dillan expected to be tossed back out of the net. He prepared himself to be thrown, but instead, he was gently placed on the ground, the net tugged from around him. Dillan opened his eyes. A blond man with golden skin concentrated on untangling Dillan.

The scent the stranger gave off was familiar, but Dillan didn't know why. He knew that he needed to be wary of the man; he was stronger than Dillan and not just because he was human. He gave off the feeling of something *more*. Yet, his hands were gentle when he touched Dillan's paw and moved it around.

"You know, it's not a good idea to shift and try to steal food. People can find out about us."

Dillan stared at the man, not understanding what he was talking about.

"I have some spare clothes in my locker, so wait to shift," the stranger said just as he untangled Dillan tail and stepped back with the net.

Dillan stomach growled, and the man smiled brightly.

"I'll bring some food out too." The stranger ran back inside, leaving

Dillan in the back alley.

Dillan contemplated leaving, but he was hungry and the stranger seemed nice. He wasn't stuffing Dillan into a box and taking him home to his girlfriend. Plus, there was the familiar smell that Dillan just couldn't place. He decided to wait for the man to come back.

A few minutes passed before the smiling blond man appeared again. He had a plate of food and a backpack in his hands. Dillan's eyes zeroed in on the food. He wanted to jump for joy that it wasn't tuna or some warm milk.

The blond set the plate down, and Dillan moved to eat it. Just as he made it over to the plate, the blond picked it up. Dillan looked up, confused. He'd thought the stranger brought the plate out for him, but he kept it away.

"No one's around. Shift and you can get dressed and eat," the stranger said.

Dillan thought about what the stranger said, but he didn't know what he meant by shift. Did he want Dillan to perform some trick?

Dillan moved a little and sat there, waiting on the plate to be placed back down.

"Come on, the faster you shift the faster we can get some food in you and warm clothes on. I know you'd rather eat the food like a human instead of a cat."

Dillan had no idea what the stranger was talking about, but his stomach growled again. He jumped up on the stranger's shoulder and went for the plate. The stranger lowered the plate back to the ground, and Dillan hopped off to eat the food. This time, he didn't give the stranger a chance to take the plate away. He pounced on the plate and ate the crisp, greasy bacon. He ate it so fast he felt as if he didn't get to taste it, but he wasn't willing to let the chance of eating pass him by.

"Slow down before you choke," the stranger instructed.

Dillan didn't slow down, not until he actually choked, the cantaloupe that was on the plate going down the wrong pipe.

"See," the stranger said as he pushed a cup of water toward Dillan.

There was a straw in it. Most humans would have brought him a bowl of water, but the stranger gave him a cup with a straw. Dillan knew how to drink out of one, but it was rare for humans to do it. It had taken Sam and Mary-Anne months to figure out that Dillan preferred to drink out of a straw.

Dillan drank the water, eyeing the stranger warily as he continued to eat. He ate a lot slower now. The stranger sat there, staring back at him. Confusion was all over his face, as if Dillan was a test subject gone wrong.

Dillan wanted to ask what he was looking at, but he knew the stranger wouldn't understand him. There were no humans who were like Doctor Dolittle. That was one of Dillan's favorite movies, and he'd always wished he knew a human he could talk to. He couldn't even talk to other animals. It was lonely when he only had himself to talk to. Mary-Anne and Sam spoke to him, but it was never directly to *him*, it was more of speaking out loud while he happened to be in the room.

Yet Dillan didn't feel that way with the stranger. He spoke to Dillan as if expecting an actual response from him. Dillan spoke, but it came out as a bunch of meows. The blond's eyebrows scrunched together.

"If you want to talk, you will have to shift. I can't exactly understand cat."

Dillan stopped trying to talk. He said the word shift again and again to himself. Dillan had no idea what the man was talking about. He felt as if he had heard the word before but couldn't place it. He tried to remember but came up empty. He went back to eating, since they couldn't talk to each other.

Dillan ate everything on the plate, even the little round things. They tasted like egg and cheese and some other ingredients; it was good. Since Dillan had slowed down on eating, he actually got to taste some of the food.

"You like the quiches?" the blond asked.

Dillan nodded. He could at least respond to yes and no questions. The blond's smile lit up his face. He seemed like the overly happy, joyous type that Dillan had seen on TV.

"Good, I made them. I'm hoping Bernadet lets me add them to the menu."
Dillan sat there, staring at the man.

"You know, this would be so much easier if you would just change. I probably look like a crazy person talking to a cat," he said.

Dillan nodded. He probably did, but Dillan had no idea what he meant by 'change.' With the food gone and the cup empty, Dillan felt a little bit more energetic. He wondered if the stranger had a cell phone. The blond had been nice to him, and he didn't want to steal from him.

Dillan looked around the back of the restaurant. He was sure he could find someone else and steal their phone. He hated becoming a thief, but he needed to make it back home. He stood and headed toward the road.

"Where are you going?"

Dillan looked back at the stranger still sitting on the ground. Dillan turned back to face the road. He'd taken a step when he heard the stranger moving behind him. He turned to see the stranger picking up his empty plate and cup.

"I don't know your story or where you came from, but there aren't any other shifters around here. No packs or prides." The blond twirled the plate around in his hands. "But if you need help, let me know. Maybe there's something I can do."

Dillan did need help, but how was he supposed to convey that? What did he mean by shifters? The blond said so many strange words; Dillan wasn't sure if he was alright in the head. He might be better off figuring things out on his own.

He sat there a little longer, staring at the stranger, neither one of them moving. Dillan was at least thirteen hours away from home, and he didn't remember which direction he was supposed to go.

He walked over to the blond and sat at his feet. His neck craned back, he meowed. He had no idea how he was going to convey the help he needed, but it was better to try than to give up.



RHY WALKED DOWN THE ALLEYWAY BETWEEN A SMALL SPORTS BAR AND A store. The store was open, having a discount sale on kitchenware. Rhy went inside, since the bar was closed during the day. The bell chimed, announcing his entrance.

"Hello, welcome to Carols. Is there something specific you're looking for?" asked a tall woman with brown hair and deep blue eyes.

Rhy walked over to the counter where she stood. He pulled out the photo of the cat to show her. "Have you seen this cat?"

Her eyes scanned over the picture, and she studied the picture for a minute. Rhy's hopes rose... until she looked up and shook her head. Rhy's shoulders slumped. He nodded and turned to leave the store.

"Oh wait—maybe Linsey's seen the cat. She works the afternoon shift. Can I see the picture again?"

Rhy set the picture on the counter. The girl took her phone out and snapped a picture of the photo. Her thumbs flew over the keyboard as she typed out a message to her coworker.

"It's a really pretty cat. What's her name?"

Rhy looked down at the photo. The cat was beautiful, with fur so black it looked nearly blue and eyes so startling they sucked him in. "It's a client's cat. Mr. Fluffkins."

She winced, hearing the name. Rhy felt the same. The name left much to be desired.

Her phone dinged with an incoming message, and she quickly read over the message. "She said she saw a cat that looked like the one in the photo the other day when she closed up."

Rhy nodded. "Did you open?"

She nodded, a frown appearing on her face. "Sorry, but I didn't see any cats in the alley. There was a huge mess though. Some drunk idiot knocked everything over last night. I was out there cleaning up this morning, but no cat."

Rhy nodded. "Would you mind if I check it out?"

She shrugged. "Go ahead. I cleaned up the trash, but it still reeks back there. I've already contacted Ms. Carol to get a professional to bleach it."

Rhy nodded and thanked her before leaving and going to the side of the building. He entered the alley, and the smell was disgusting. He covered his nose as he walked down the narrow path. It was somewhat cleaned, but he could see the evidence from where the trash had been knocked over. He dreaded walking any farther into the alley, but he closed his eyes. He needed to make sure the cat wasn't just hiding under anything.

Even with his nose covered, the stench threatened to make him puke. They needed more than bleach. Fire might help. Or a black hole. The smell was probably deep into the concrete. That's how bad the alley smelled. The human had thought it smelled bad, but with his shifter senses, it was overwhelming. His eyes were watering by the time he made it to the back. He doubted the cat was there with how bad it smelled, but he still looked around and called out for the cat a few times. Receiving no answer, he practically ran out of the alley. He made it to the street, breathing in gulps of air. It wasn't as

fresh as the wilderness, but it was ten times better than the alleyway.

Rhy's phone rang in his pocket. He pulled it out and pressed the phone to his ear as he walked to his car. "You find anything?"

Logan sighed on the other side. "No, and I'm starting to think it's impossible. Did you?"

Rhy got in the car, turned it on, and hooked the phone to the Bluetooth. "Yeah, kind of. There was a sighting, but that's it. Cat didn't stay in the area long."

"Fucking great," Logan said.

That's how Rhy felt. He couldn't catch a break. When he'd agreed to take the case, he hadn't thought it would be easy, but he hadn't thought it would be so hard either.

"So he was in that area. What now?" Logan asked.

Rhy sighed, rubbing his forehead. "I'll come back once the bar opens up and try to see if anyone saw him. If it was around the alley at nighttime, maybe one of the patrons saw it or might even have scared it off. Hopefully, they weren't too drunk to remember and can point us in the right direction."

"Yeah, that might work. I'll keep checking around the neighborhood. Do you know I was sucked into at least four homes today?" Logan sounded exasperated. "All I wanted to do was ask about the cat, and yet I was drawn into the houses."

Rhy laughed, picturing Logan being lured in with promises of cookies and coffee.

"Don't fucking laugh at me. They wouldn't take no for an answer."

Rhy laughed more. "Let me guess—they had cookies?"

Logan didn't reply, the other end of the phone line going quiet. Rhy burst with laughter as he pulled away from his parking spot and got onto the road to head back to the office. There was no point waiting around. He would come back once the sports bar opened.



A FEW HOURS LATER—AND a few failed attempts at sleep—Rhy stood outside the entrance to the sports bar with Logan.

"It smells like piss, beer, and cheap nuts," Logan commented.

Rhy laughed. "What the hell does cheap nuts smell like?"

Logan shrugged as they walked in. There was a stale stench in the air. The bar dingy and dimly lit. Rhy's eyes scanned the bar and saw only five patrons. The bar had just opened about thirty minutes prior to their arrival. The bartender, a rugged-looking man, eyed them before turning away to serve one of the patrons at the bar.

Rhy was pretty sure if the lights were brighter, no one would step foot in there. There were dark colored spots on the wall and floor. They weren't decorations... more of a stain.

Logan nudged Rhy. "Cheap nuts."

Rhy didn't know what cheap nuts really smelled like, but if they smelled like the bar, then it was something he never wanted to come across again. Rhy moved toward the door as Logan went to one of the three tables in the bar that had people sitting at them. Rhy leaned his elbows on the bar and waited patiently for the bartender to finish with the customer before signaling him over.

Rhy held the photo of the cat in his hands. He'd found himself holding onto it even when he wasn't asking people about him. It felt oddly calming, which shot up millions of red flags. Rhy ignored them all. There was something about this case that was drawing him in, made him feel almost primal. He didn't know why, but he knew if he found the cat all his questions would be answered.

"What can I get for you?" a soft voice asked.

Lost in his head, Rhy looked up to notice the bartender had made it over to him. A closer look showed he had a gentle look about him. Rhy inhaled

and stopped short.

He could smell wolf on the bartender.

His tiger instantly come to the surface with a low growl of warning. The bartender's eyes grew big, and he put his hands up. The scent of fear mixed with the rest of the room. The wolf's head tilted to the side, offering his throat. Rhy closed his eyes, getting his tiger side under control. The wolf obviously meant no harm. While he wouldn't let his guard down, there was no reason to scare him any further.

Feeling himself calm down, Rhy opened his eyes once more to stare at the bartender. His neck was still bared, and his hands clenched at the bottom of his shirt, trembling slightly. Rhy felt bad that he'd scared the wolf so badly. He hadn't smelled any wolves around town, so he'd been caught off guard by the bartender. As far as he knew, the wolf shifters had a pack two towns over. It was rare to find wolves by themselves. They were pack animals, unlike cats.

Rhy studied him a little longer, and the wolf stood perfectly still, avoiding eye contact. "Sorry," Rhy said.

The wolf still held himself stiffly, baring his neck to Rhy.

Rhy sighed. "Calm down, kid. People are looking at us funny."

Nothing happened.

Rhy placed the picture on the bar and pushed it toward the bartender. "Have you seen this cat? It was last seen in the alley between this bar and the shop next door."

Rhy watched as the wolf stood there a moment before relaxing and moving to look at the photo. Rhy grabbed a stool to sit down. He thought it best not to be at his full height. The wolf was too skittish, and he didn't want to scare him off. The bartender's hands still shook as he reached for the photo and brought it closer to his face. His eyebrows dipped in concentration, and after a few seconds, he placed the photo back down.

"No. Umm, I don't remember seeing a cat, but when I closed up,

everything was scattered around, so he might have run off."

Rhy sighed in resignation. "Okay, thank you," he said as he stood back up.

The bartender backed up a little, running into the wall behind him. Rhy quirked an eyebrow but said nothing. It wasn't his place to meddle in wolf pack affairs. He would be informing Kenny and Dezi of a potential pack settling in their territory, but for now, Rhy didn't think the bartender had anyone. Rhy pulled out his card and slid it over to the bartender.

"Call if you hear anything about a black cat."

The wolf nodded eagerly. Rhy nodded back before turning and searching for Logan. He was easy to pick out in the bar. More people had entered, but the sports bar was still mostly vacant. Logan turned, and they locked eyes, the slight raise of his shoulder told Rhy everything he needed to know. They didn't know crap and still had no leads. Rhy tilted his head toward the door. He walked out and made it all the way to the car before Logan spoke.

"So what happened with the cute bartender?"

Rhy rolled his eyes as he got in the car and started it.

"Come on, don't hold out," Logan said.

Rhy glanced over at him before pulling away from the curb. "Nothing happened. He's a wolf," Rhy remarked.

Rhy saw Logan shrug out of the corner of his eye.

"That isn't important. What's important is your dick is going to fall off at this point if you don't use it."

"What?" Rhy said.

Logan huffed, as if Rhy was supposed to understand what he was saying.

"You know the saying: use it or lose it?"

Rhy nodded.

"You're not using your dick. Shit, I've known you for a couple of years and I've seen you go on three dates. Mind you, none of them ended with you using your dick," Logan said.

Rhy rolled his eyes. He had no idea why he even entertained any of the ridiculous stuff that came out of Logan's mouth. "Just because I don't have sex with anything that has two legs doesn't mean I don't use my dick."

Logan threw his hands in the air. "Jacking off doesn't count."

Rhy shrugged—it counted in his mind.

"What are you waiting for?" Logan asked.

Rhy didn't answer and focused on the road. He could feel Logan's eyes practically boring into the side of his head with his intense glare. The car stayed silent longer than Rhy thought possible for Logan. Two blocks from their office, Logan broke.

"Come on, just tell me. I'm dying here," Logan whined.

Rhy laughed. "You're dramatic. You're not dying."

Logan slouched in the passenger seat. Rhy pulled into the small parking lot they owned. He turned the car off, but neither one of them got out of the car. Rhy ran his fingers through his hair and closed his eyes. He was going to tell Logan.

He took a deep breath. "I'm waiting for my fated mate."

The car was even quieter after his confession. Rhy sighed as he turned to look over at Logan, fully prepared for laughter and the usual jokes that accompanied the declaration. Finding a fated mate was rare. So rare that most shifters said it was a myth. Rhy knew it was only hopeful wishing, but he had been on plenty of dates with guys and none of them had felt right.

If he couldn't have his fated mate, then he was better off with no one. He wasn't a man who could fake love or be in a relationship hoping to one day fall in love. He wanted the real thing. Something so strong he felt it down to his core.

Logan looked at his lap for a while before he looked over to Rhy. Their eyes locked for a second. Rhy could see sadness there but didn't know where it came from.

"You know it's rare to find a fated mate, right?"

Rhy nodded; he knew.

Logan turned to look out the window. Rhy was sure he wasn't staring at anything in particular. "Be prepared. Even if you do find your fated mate, they might not want you."

Rhy's mouth dropped open in shock. Logan sounded as if he spoke from experience. He reached out to comfort his friend, but Logan opened the door and stepped out.

"I'm guessing you aren't going to Dezi's for movie night?"

Rhy had forgotten all about it. He had planned to go back out and search for the cat. Someone somewhere had to have seen it.

Logan nodded as if he understood where Rhy's head was at. "Just let Dezi know. I might tell him I can't make it either." Logan sighed, and it sounded exhausted. A drastic difference to how he had sounded moments ago. "If you go out looking for the cat, make sure not to stay out too late. We have the meeting tomorrow, and as much as I love covering for you, it's not a work meeting. So make sure to go home and rest. Don't stay out all night."

Rhy nodded. "Yes, Mother Logan," Rhy joked.

Logan rolled his eyes.

Rhy didn't get a chance to ask Logan what had upset him so much. He shut the door and was into his building before any more words could pass between them.

Rhy sat there for a little longer. He contemplated going in after Logan, but he knew that if Logan didn't want to talk about something, then he wouldn't—no matter how much Rhy would try.

He sighed, pulling his phone out and shooting a text to Dezi, letting his friend know he wasn't going to make movie night. He placed his phone on the passenger seat before starting the car again and heading back out to look for the cat.

Dillan

THE BLOND HAD LEFT DILLAN IN THE RESTAURANT'S BACK, PROMISING HE would be back to help him after his shift. Dillan hadn't minded, since the blond came back a few times on his breaks and brought food. He never brought out gross things either. They were all delicious, and Dillan especially liked the little cakes.

He was lying on a small towel the blond had brought him. After Dillan hadn't done the shift trick, the blond had kept asking him if he had given up and laid a towel on the ground.

The sun started to go down just as the blond came out the back. He stretched his arms high above his head before turning to Dillan.

"You ready to go?"

Dillan didn't know where they were going. He needed to go home, but he doubted the blond knew where Mary-Anne's home was. Dillan sat there, staring at the blond. He may have brought him food and talked to him normally, but he wasn't sure if he could trust the blond. There were no signs as to why he *shouldn't* trust him either.

Dillan sighed, knowing he couldn't walk for fear he would start going in

the wrong direction now that he didn't have directions.

"What's the matter?" the blond said, crouching to Dillan's level. "Besides the fact that you won't shift."

There he went again with the word. Dillan still didn't know what he meant.

The blond sighed when Dillan did nothing but sit there. "You can either freeze out here or you can come with me. We can try and find out where you live. I doubt you live out in the wild."

Dillan liked that option. He got up and walked a little past the blond. He didn't know which direction to go, so he waited patiently for the blond. The man laughed before walking past Dillan and leading the way. He turned the corner, and they passed two stores before the blond made an abrupt turn. Dillan had to backtrack a little in order to turn.

He went down the small opening, wondering if the blond man was possibly homeless. Dillan followed him quietly. At least the alleyway didn't smell like the one Dillan had been in the first night he was lost. This one smelled like it had been cleaned. He turned and saw no trash cans. It was empty of anything.

They made it to a set of stairs. The blond easily went all the way to the top. Dillan's sore paws and legs protested. He huffed out air before jumping and making it all the way to the top where the blond held a door open. Dillan walked into the apartment and instantly went to the small sofa against the wall. He hopped on and lay down, happy to be lying on something other than a dish towel or newspapers.

"Glad you can get comfortable," the blond commented.

Dillan raised his head a little from his front paws. He let it drop back down, too tired. Even behind the restaurant, he had stayed awake. He was exhausted, and everything was catching up to him.

"Here. I know you're in your cat form, but just in case," the blond said as he draped a blanket over Dillan.

Dillan's eyes were already closed. He tried to open them, but they felt glued shut. He tried to fight the sleep that called out to him, but it was impossible. He felt his body completely relax as he drifted off.



WHEN DILLAN WOKE, the first thing he knew was that he wasn't alone. He faked being asleep as he opened an eye a little to peek around the room. The blond sat on the ground, packing his backpack with clothes. He paid no attention to Dillan, instead focusing on his task. Dillan watched him for a few moments.

"Good, you're awake," the blond announced, surprising Dillan.

He hadn't turned around to look at Dillan once, yet he'd known instantly when Dillan was awake. Dillan sat up, studying the man. He was getting a distinct feeling that the blond wasn't human. But if he wasn't human, then what was he?

"Ready?" he asked

Dillan tilted his head to the side in confusion. He wasn't sure where they were going.

"This would be easier if you would change, but I'm starting to get the feeling that you can't. Am I right?"

Dillan had no idea what he meant by *change*, so he nodded. He couldn't do it.

The blond sighed. "Yeah, I got that feeling when you didn't even change while you slept. My apartment is too small for me to change. So we're going out somewhere where I can teach you."

Dillan was still lost, but if the guy felt as if he could teach Dillan some trick, he didn't see any harm in it.

They made it to the door before the blond turned around. "By the way, my name is Kash Hiegan. Once you learn to shift, you can tell me yours."

Dillan was happy he could stop referring to Kash as “the blond man”—it was starting to be a little rude. After all, Kash had fed him and given him a warm place to sleep. He also had been nothing but nice to him. Dillan followed Kash out the door.

They walked a little way before making it to a clearing. Dillan had seen plenty of them on his travels, since the back roads he’d crossed had had a bunch of them. They walked a little farther until they were just past the tree line.

Dillan sat and kept his eyes on Kash as he put his backpack on the ground and began to strip. Dillan blinked, watching Kash get undressed until he snapped out of it and turned around. It felt wrong to watch Kash and stare at his naked flesh.

"I need you to turn this way, so you can see how I do this," Kash instructed.

Dillan turned back, his eyes wandering for all of a few seconds before looking straight into Kash's eyes. He had to crane his neck back, since Kash was standing, but he kept his eyes up. Kash laughed, a smile breaking out over his face as if he knew Dillan was avoiding looking at him. Kash crouched down onto all fours on the ground. Dillan stared at him, wondering what he was doing. He wondered for a second if Kash might have lost his mind.

"I'm going to shift into my cat—don't be afraid, I won't hurt you."

Dillan felt confused. He heard the words, but didn't understand what Kash meant.

"We still won't be able to communicate, since we aren't a part of the same pride or pack. But at least you'll be able to see a shift," Kash said.

Dillan watched Kash, at first nothing happened. Then Dillan felt it in the air before he saw anything. He watched with wide eyes as Kash changed in front of his eyes. His human body was gone and there stood a mountain lion. Dillan backed up a little in fear.

He looked around for Kash. Maybe he had blinked or passed out... Hazel brown eyes looked back at him, the same eyes as Kash's. Dillan shook his head in confusion. How was it possible that Kash had changed from being human into a big cat?

Just as before, Dillan felt it in the air before Kash changed back into a human form.

"See," Kash said. He sat up on his knees and spread his arms out in a *ta-da* fashion.

Dillan was sure it was some magic trick that had never been performed before.

"Now you try," Kash said.

Dillan stared back at Kash. He was pretty sure Kash had lost his mind if he thought Dillan had a human body to change into. Then again, Dillan felt as if *he* had lost his mind. Kash had just changed in front of him. Kash had started off as human and turned into a cat, and it wasn't some house cat either. It was a mountain lion.

Dillan was sure that Kash was mistaken and that he didn't have the ability to change. He'd been a cat his whole life.

"All you have to do is concentrate. Think about your hands and feet," Kash said.

Dillan stared at him. How was he supposed to imagine any of those things when he'd never felt them before? Except for in his weird nightmare where he had fingers and moved on two legs instead of four. Dillan shook his head. It couldn't be real. It didn't make sense. It was fake.

And yet... he'd seen Kash do the impossible in front of him.

"It doesn't really hurt if that's what you're afraid of," Kash said calmly.

Dillan stared Kash in the eyes, contemplating if he was crazy or not. His golden eyes showed Kash's confidence in what he was saying to Dillan. Dillan closed his eyes and tried to imagine what Kash had said. He tried to imagine having hands and arms and legs. It felt distant and almost

unimaginable. The dream was more fear-based than about Dillan being human, so he didn't think focusing on it would work.

He stood there for a while, trying to do what Kash had done, but nothing happened. His frustration and disappointment won out as he opened his eyes and lay on the ground. He had really hoped that he had the same ability as Kash. He wanted so badly to be able to communicate with others.

"Don't give up. It takes some time. Usually, an alpha would help you." Kash sat with his legs crossed.

Dillan didn't get up. He wanted Kash to let go of the notion that he would be able to change. He was already disappointed in himself for believing for a second that he was more than just a cat.

"You want to try again?" Kash asked.

Dillan didn't want to, but the way Kash looked at him made him stand and try again. He focused on changing. He couldn't be something he never remembered being, so instead, he imagined what it would be like to stand and move on two legs. There was a tingling sensation that coursed through him.

Dillan's eyes flew open, making him lose all concentration, but he had felt *something*. He looked over to Kash.

Kash sat there with a big smile on his face. "You felt it, right?"

Dillan nodded vigorously. He had felt something.

"Then all we have to do is keep trying. I'll show you my shift again."

Dillan sat back, eager to pay attention this time. His eyes trained on Kash's every move, not missing a second. The excitement bubbled in him at the prospect of being something so much more. To finally understand himself.

And most importantly, be able to talk to others. Something he wanted more than anything.



RHY WALKED INTO HIS APARTMENT, DRAGGING HIS FEET. THE SUN WAS nearly up, and he'd just walked through the door. He had gone down every alley and checked in the smallest places he could fit in. Every time, there was nothing, no cat. He sighed, still smelling the garbage from the last alley he'd gone through. He walked into his bedroom; he glanced over at the shower and then back to his bed. He sighed, knowing he wouldn't be able to really sleep with the stench of garbage in the room.

He dragged his feet over to the bathroom. Wrenching the clothes from his body, he tossed them in the hamper by the door. He didn't bother looking in the mirror. He knew he had to look tired. His eyes were probably red and droopy, and his face needed a good shave. He touched his jaw at the thought, and sure enough, the stubble was thick on his face. He groaned just thinking about the amount of coordination it would take for him not to slice off his face.

He turned the shower on and, without waiting, got in. The cold water was a shock to his system, and he yelped as it beat against him. It woke him up for all of a few minutes before the water started to get warmer. As the

temperature heated up, his eyes began to drop. Rhy closed them as he moved his face under the spray. He stood there, letting the water rush over him and drench his hair, making it plaster to his forehead. He should probably get a haircut, but it would, of course, have to wait until after the cat was found.

Just thinking about how he had yet to find the cat grated on his nerves. He rubbed his face and ground the palms of his hands against his grainy feeling eyes. Why couldn't he find one single cat? It shouldn't be as hard as it was, and yet he couldn't find it. Rhy grabbed his shower gel, still thinking about the cat, and he misjudged the amount of pressure he placed on the bottle. Half the bottle of shower gel emptied into his hand.

"Darn it," he shouted. He sighed as most of the shower gel fell to the shower floor. He lathered the rest against his skin. He quickly finished in the shower, not bothering to dry off, and staggered back into his bedroom. Falling face first into bed, he sighed with relief as he relaxed into the sheets. He gripped his pillow and pushed his face into it. Within seconds, he could feel himself drifting off to sleep.

The ringing of his phone had him groaning in protest. He had just lain in bed!

He got up, looked for where his phone was, and saw it sitting on the nightstand. Rhy glared at it, not remembering when he'd placed it there. He grabbed it to see who would be calling him. He noticed the time was seven thirty, and he yawned. The number on the screen not recognizable, he contemplated letting it go to voicemail and just going to sleep, but the thought of it being important made him press the green button to answer.

"Hello," Rhy said grouchy. He sounded half asleep, and something in him wished he was.

"Sorry, did I wake you?" asked the voice on the other end.

Rhy had heard the voice before, but couldn't place it in his exhausted state. "To be woken would require for me to actually get some sleep," Rhy retorted.

The other side of the phone was silent for a while.

Rhy sighed. "You called."

"Right, um, sorry."

Rhy suddenly knew exactly who it was on the line. It was the wolf from the bar. Rhy had given him his card. Rhy was interested in what the wolf had to say. "It's fine..." Rhy had never gotten his name and didn't think the wolf would be keen to be referred to as that.

"Morgan," the wolf supplied.

"Morgan. You called—does that mean you have something for me?" Rhy was hopeful.

There was a clanking noise on the other side of the line before Morgan spoke. "Yeah, one of the guys that comes to the bar was talking tonight. Usually, I just ignore him. He's a bit of an asshole, and sometimes the stories he tells are a bunch of rubbish. But this time he started talking about a cat, how'd he'd found a crazy cat and gave it home only for it to steal his phone."

Rhy didn't know what to say about the phone stealing bit. "Did he say where he got the cat from or what it looked like?"

"Yeah, said it was an evil black cat, but he didn't say where he got it from. I asked him a few times, but he was way too drunk to give a straight answer. He just kept talking about how his girlfriend was upset the cat was gone, and how he will never look at cats the same. Sorry," Morgan said.

"No, this is good, Morgan. Thank you for calling." He began to pace. "You wouldn't happen to know where this guy lives do you?"

Morgan was silent for a second. "No, but I know he'll be at the bar tonight. There's a big game on and a few of them come down to bet and drink."

Rhy smiled. "That will work. Thanks, Morgan."

"Yeah, no problem," Morgan said.

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask, but he wasn't sure if he should. Rhy knew he wouldn't be able to sleep if he didn't ask though. "Hey Morgan, do

you belong to a pack?"

The silence on the other end had Rhy checking his phone to see if the call had disconnected. The screen still said they were connected, but not even the sound of breathing came across the line. It was as if asking that question had made all functions and signs of life freeze in Morgan.

"Morgan," Rhy called out.

There was no answer. Rhy knew how it felt not to have anyone. He'd spent most of his life without anyone until he met Dezi and Kenny, but the years before them were not the best memories. Rhy sighed, waiting on Morgan and knowing he wasn't going to get a reply. He didn't know Morgan's story, but he would bet that he didn't have a pack.

"Look, I wasn't asking to scare you. I just needed to make sure no pack was encroaching on our territory," Rhy informed him. There was still no reply, so Rhy went on. "I'm not trying to scare you away. I know how wolves are pack animals and tend to move together." Still there was no response. "Can you say something? I feel like I'm talking to myself, and with the lack of sleep I've had as of late, it makes me feel a little crazy."

There was a throat clearing. Rhy sighed in relief, glad he hadn't scared Morgan away, leaving Rhy talking to thin air. Rhy waited for Morgan to speak. It took a minute before another throat clearing.

"I... I'm by myself," Morgan whispered.

His voice was so so soft Rhy would have missed it if there was any other noise in his quiet apartment. Rhy closed his eyes and knew that what he was about to do was the right thing to do, but without asking Dezi or Kenny, he would get his ass handed to him later.

"We shifters have to stick together when we can. I know I'm a tiger and you're a wolf, but if you ever want to come around and hang out, you should. There's a few of us here," Rhy offered.

"Oh," Morgan replied.

Rhy laughed, knowing he'd taken the wolf by surprise. "There's no

pressure."

There was silence for a minute. "Are you going to tell your alpha about me?"

Rhy could imagine Morgan shaking and clenching onto the phone for dear life. Even his voice shook with the question. Rhy felt bad for whatever had happened to Morgan to have him so fearful. Rhy doubted it was just because he was a tiger. Morgan seemed truly afraid of the idea of Dezi finding out. Rhy ran his fingers through his hair, gripping it a little to pull it back as he tried to relieve the tension of an oncoming headache. He couldn't lie to Dezi, but he didn't want to scare Morgan either.

"Dezi isn't an alpha that will come and beat you up for being here. He just wants to know who's in his territory," Rhy said.

Rhy could hear Morgan's breathing pick up, and it was a lot different than when Rhy had asked if he had a pack.

"Calm down, Morgan," Rhy said calmly.

Hyperventilating sounds came over the phone as more time passed. Rhy didn't know how to help Morgan without being there. Rhy needed to first get him to calm down.

He switched the phone to his other ear and began to speak calmly to Morgan. "Slow your breathing down," he instructed. "Try to match me."

He took big audible breaths and held them for a second before letting them go. At first, Morgan's breathing was still off and too fast, and Rhy feared he wouldn't be able to help Morgan. Soon though, his breathing started to slow down and match Rhy's. Rhy kept up his breathing until Morgan seemed under control.

"Where are you, Morgan?" Rhy asked.

There was no answer.

"I need you to tell me. It isn't safe for you to get riled up in public. What if you were to shift?"

"I'm... Umm. I'm at home," Morgan finally said.

Rhy sighed with relief. "Good. Why don't you go sit down and relax?" He could still hear Morgan breathing on the other side but didn't hear any other movement.

"I just found this job! It will take me some time—! If you could give me a few weeks, I'll be out of here!" Morgan shouted, his words practically blurring together with how fast he spoke.

"What? Why would you have to leave?" Rhy was confused. If Morgan had no pack, that meant he had nowhere to go. Dezi would never make him leave with nowhere to go.

"I need time before getting out of this territory. I thought it was void of shifters. I hadn't heard of any being here. You have to believe me! I wouldn't have come here if I had known." Morgan was back to hyperventilating. It wasn't as bad as before, but Rhy didn't want it to get any worse.

"Sit down, Morgan," Rhy said. He waited to hear movement before he spoke again. "No one is kicking you out. Dezi isn't that type of alpha, and we aren't that type of pride. There is no need to panic," Rhy reassured.

Morgan's breathing had slowed down, but Rhy knew Morgan would probably have to see it in order to believe it.

"How about you come down and meet Dezi for yourself?" Rhy suggested.

"What?" Morgan asked. There was a clattering sound in the background, as if something had broken.

"I know we don't really know each other, but I'll be there if anything goes wrong," Rhy said.

"He's your alpha. You would stand up to him for me?" The confusion in Morgan's voice made Rhy want to know his story even more. The guys would definitely say something about him being a bleeding heart. Rhy couldn't help it; there was something about a lost soul that called to him. Maybe because he had been one once.

"I'm sure none of them will have any problems with you, but yes, I would stand up to my friends for you."

"Why?" Morgan asked. "I mean, I'm just some dumb weak wolf. I'm not even a cat shifter."

Rhy sat up in his bed. "First, don't call yourself dumb. As far as I can tell, you seem far from that. And just because you're a wolf and I'm a tiger doesn't make us enemies. The whole cat and dog thing is for actual animals."

Although, shifters had taken to that myth as well. Shifters hating each other solely based on what they were was idiotic, but Rhy couldn't fix the whole shifter world. He could be nice to a wolf who had no one though.

"I'm not sure it's a good idea. What if you get in trouble?" Morgan asked.

"Don't worry about that. We're all good friends, and like I said before, our dynamic is a little different."

The silence that greeted him was becoming normal. Rhy figured it was just Morgan thinking and weighing his options. He hoped Morgan would agree to meet the guys. Rhy should probably let them know first.

"Okay, but I work tonight. I can come for a few minutes before I need to go in," Morgan said.

Rhy smiled. "Okay, great. See you this afternoon."

There was silence once more, but Rhy knew Morgan hadn't hung up. He waited for Morgan to speak what was on his mind.

"You'll be there, right?"

"Of course. I'll text you the address," Rhy promised.

"Okay... I should get some sleep then," Morgan said.

"Get some rest and thanks for the info. I'll also be by the bar later, and you can point out the man who saw the cat."

They hung up with Rhy reassuring him once more that Dezi wasn't going to kick him out. Rhy looked at the time and realized he had gotten to sleep for an hour, but he'd spent just as much time on the phone with Morgan. He contemplated lying back down and closing his eyes for a few more hours. The pillow called to him like cherry pie fresh out of the oven.

Rhy shot Logan a text, letting him know he still needed two hours of

sleep and then he would be in. Before he could even lay his head on the pillow, his phone rang. He groaned as he answered, knowing it would be Logan.

"What the fuck do you mean you need two hours? I thought I said you should be back before sunrise."

Rhy sighed. "You didn't sa—"

"Don't start spitting your bullshit technicalities. You owe me a cup of coffee every morning for the next month, and when you find this cat, I'm betting the old lady will give you a reward, and I want her chocolate chip cookies. As many as you can get," Logan said.

"Deal," Rhy rushed to say.

The phone beeped, letting him know Logan had hung up. Rhy closed his eyes as he relaxed and tried to get some rest before he needed to go out and find the cat.



RHY HAD SLEPT LONGER than he had planned, but the rest had been needed. He'd slept better than he had the night before, no weird dreams or constant moving around. He'd simply slept.

He raced over to Dezi's house, stretching as he got out of his car. He walked up to the door and went in without knocking. Dezi had an open-door policy. All of them did.

No one was in the front dining room, so Rhy walked farther into the house until he made it to the space in back where most of their meetings were held. Two steps in and he knew he'd messed something up. Clyde and Cole both stared at him with raised eyebrows. Logan sat there with a smirk on his face, and Dezi turned to stare at Rhy, but Rhy stared at Morgan.

The one thing he'd forgotten to call the guys about. The one thing that had nagged at him on the drive over.

Morgan looked small, as if he was trying to crouch in on himself and make himself look smaller than he was. Rhy turned to look at Kenny, but Kenny's eyes—unlike everyone else—were trained solely on Morgan.

"Hey, Morgan. I see you made it," Rhy said calmly.

Logan burst with laughter. "Nice."

"Rhy, Morgan here was telling us how you invited him over," Dezi said.

Rhy nodded and took the seat on Dezi's left. "I did. He doesn't belong to a pack and there are no other wolves around here." Rhy shrugged, trying to play it off.

The look he got from Dezi told him he hadn't played it off well enough. Dezi turned to look at Morgan, who sat quietly, barely making any noise.

"Welcome, Morgan. Rhy is right. If you don't have a pack, you're more than welcome to come around here. And if you need somewhere to shift and stretch your wolf, we are more than happy to help you. We just ask that you make sure no humans see you, and you don't bring humans around."

Morgan looked shocked, his eyes going wide and his jaw slack as he stared at Dezi. "You mean you aren't kicking me out?"

A growl erupted from Kenny, gaining everyone's attention. Kenny paid them no mind. Morgan glanced at Kenny before focusing back on Dezi. Rhy saw the blush that crept up Morgan's neck and tinted his cheeks.

Dezi looked to Rhy before turning back to Morgan. "Why would I kick you out?"

Morgan fidgeted and cast his eyes down at the table. Rhy watched him start to tremble slightly. Rhy reached across the table to grasp Morgan's hand.

Kenny growled and slapped his hand away. Everyone in the room went silent as Kenny stood and growled at Rhy. Cole moved fast and was next to Kenny in under a second. Kenny didn't even look at Cole or acknowledge him, his silver eyes trained on Rhy.

"Kenny," Dezi said in warning.

Rhy stared at Kenny in surprise. It was the first time Kenny had ever been

hostile toward him.

"Rhy, I think you should move your hand back," Logan suggested.

Rhy started to move his hand, and, again, a dangerous growl left Kenny's lips, fangs showing. His eyes began to shift; he was letting his leopard take control.

"Shit! Slowly," Clyde instructed.

Rhy almost wanted to laugh. It was all so crazy—he'd just wanted to comfort Morgan, but instead, Kenny was acting wild and letting his leopard rule him.

"Kenny," Rhy tried, the shock of one of his best friends growling at him finally wearing off.

The only problem was, Kenny wasn't being himself. He was letting instinct rule him.

"Enough," Dezi said in his alpha tone.

The power went through Rhy, and he knew every one of them that was connected could feel it. As if finally seeing what he was doing, Kenny blinked, and the minor shifts that had been changing went back to normal. His fangs smoothed back out, and his eyes no longer looked wild.

"I..." Kenny looked at Morgan who had been sitting there, basically shaking like a leaf and filling the room with the scent of fear. Rhy watched as Kenny's face fell, and he turned away from Morgan.

"I think it's best if I leave for now," Kenny said.

He didn't wait for anyone to say anything, just turned and left the room. Moments later, they could all hear the front door slamming shut.

Rhy went over to Morgan, and he placed a hand on his shoulder. Morgan jumped, nearly falling out of the chair as if Rhy had punched him. Rhy sat next to Morgan, scooting closer to him.

"Everything is okay," Rhy said. He kept his hand on Morgan's shoulder for the calming effect as he instructed him to breathe slowly and to match his breathing pattern, just like over the phone.

"I'm sorry if he scared you, Morgan. Kenny isn't normally like that," Dezi said.

Morgan looked to him, and Rhy nodded in confirmation. Kenny was usually calm and collected, never angry or aggressive unless he needed to be, but just a few minutes ago was the most aggressive Rhy had ever seen him.

Rhy looked across the table for Logan; he had seemed to know what was happening. When he looked to the seat where Logan usually sat, it was empty. He looked around the room and saw Cole and Clyde whispering with Dezi.

"Sorry," Morgan whispered.

"Don't be. Nothing that happened is your fault," Rhy said.

Morgan nodded. "But h—"

"You nodded your head—that means you understand this isn't your fault."

Dezi touched Rhy's shoulder, and Rhy turned toward him.

"He's right, Morgan, you did nothing. You're more than welcome to stay and hang out. We'll be going out hunting later."

Morgan shook a little, never looking Dezi in the eye. Rhy watched as Morgan twirled his thumbs in his lap. "Thank you, but I have to get to work."

Dezi nodded and left, Clyde and Cole following behind him.

Rhy turned to Morgan. "How did you get here?"

Morgan shrugged. "I took the bus."

"I'll give you a ride to work, come on." Rhy stood.

"You don't have to. I ca—"

Rhy turned to look at Morgan. "I'll take you. It's not a big deal. Plus, I kind of have plans there." Rhy lifted his eyebrow.

"Oh, yeah." Morgan stood.

They walked out to the car, and Rhy noticed Kenny's motorcycle was gone. He would have to talk to his friend later about what had happened. Rhy sighed, confused and a little hurt. He shook his head. He would figure out what had happened later. He hurried to the driver's side of the car. Getting in,

he glanced over to Morgan and saw he was still huddled in on himself.

"Everything is okay," Rhy said.

Morgan nodded. Rhy went to say more, but the look on Morgan's face said he didn't want to hear anything else. Rhy sighed and started the car, leaving Dezi's house.

He switched over his train of thought to focus on finding the cat.

Dillan

DILLAN PANTED AS HE GLARED DAGGERS AT KASH. THEY'D SPENT THE WHOLE day out in the forest, trying to shift. Dillan believed now that it was possible, since he had shifted for all of two seconds before he was a cat again, but he couldn't forget the feeling of having fingers, toes, and no tail. It had been a strange sensation, but one that brought him excitement. He hadn't had time to try to talk; he'd reverted back to a cat too quickly.

"Come on, cat. We'll try again," Kash called out.

Dillan lay there, determined to stay out there and try again. Now that he knew it was possible, he had no wish to stop trying. Dillan got up and tried again to shift. He recalled everything he had felt when his flesh had touched the grass. It had felt so different than his fur—how his toes dug into the dirt or how the grass tickled between his fingers. He just wanted the chance to talk to Kash and tell him his name was Dillan not cat.

"You're wearing yourself out," Kash said.

Dillan ignored him, and he closed his eyes, determined to once again shift. He felt the tingle working through his body. It started in his back legs and made its way to his face. His nose tingled, making it feel as if he needed to sneeze, and his body went from light to heavy. His skin felt stretched to the max, and it itched all over where his fur receded. Dillan stayed focused and pushed through, even when he felt uncomfortable.

There were shouts that didn't sound normal, but Dillan didn't dare open

his eyes to check. He wanted it too badly. He kept pushing. Finally, he couldn't any longer. Dillan collapsed against the cool grass, and it brushed against his skin, making him feel slightly itchy.

"Wow," Kash said.

Dillan breathed heavily, turning his head to the side to look at Kash. His light brown eyes were wide as he stared down at Dillan.

"What?" he croaked out. Dillan sat up so fast he saw black spots in his vision. He placed his hand on the ground to stop himself from falling.

He blinked the spots away, surprised he was still in his human form. He tried again to speak.

"He-l-ph-ooo." It sounded off. He tried again and again until he could clearly say, "Hello."

"How long have you been shifted?" Kash asked.

Dillan ignored the question, still too shocked that he could talk and by his fingers. He wiggled them in front of his face as he inspected the light brown skin. It was a stark difference to the black fur he was accustomed too. The first time he'd shifted, he hadn't had time to really look at himself. Now, he looked at his body the best he could. He twisted around, trying to see all of himself. He looked behind him only to see black fur swish past his face. Dillan worried for a second he might be shifting back to his cat form. He hadn't had enough time in the human one.

Moments passed as he watched his tail swish back and forth, and he moved his hand and gripped the tail. He watched as his fingers wrapped around it, the fur soft to the touch. He hadn't shifted back, but he still had a tail. He turned to look at Kash. There was no tail behind Kash; he looked fully human, but Dillan still had cat features.

"I have a tail," Dillan blurted out.

Kash had a look of confusion on his face as stared back at Dillan. "You have cat ears too."

Dillan let go of his tail, his hands moving slowly over his face and

through his hair until he touched the top of his head where the texture of hair turned into fur. He rubbed the fur, knowing the feeling of fingers against his ears. He still had cat ears. Dillan was confused. He was sure he had done everything right, and Kash had never shifted with any of the features Dillan had.

Kash sat in front of Dillan, a calm look crossing his face. His gentle smile that seemed to put Dillan at ease was shining brightly. "Well, now you can at least tell me your name."

He could talk! "Dillan."

Kash smiled. "Alright, Dillan. Let's get dressed, then we can grab something to eat, and you can tell me how you ended up all the way out here." Kash stood, stretching his arms above his head.

Dillan stood and did the same. The feeling was completely different from when he was a cat. Bones cracked as he stretched, and his legs wobbled a little, unfamiliar with balancing on only two.

"Careful there," Kash said as he reached out to steady Dillan.

Dillan smiled up at him. He was standing on two legs that weren't covered in fur.

"Thank you," Dillan rushed to say. He may not have been able to talk his whole life, but Sam and Mary-Anne had taught him manners. The memory of the older couple made his heart ache. He needed to get home, but how was he supposed to explain that he was more than a cat?

"You okay?" Kash's worried tone startled Dillan.

He wasn't sure if he was alright. There were so many questions, but he didn't know where to start. His whole life he'd dreamed of talking, of saying everything that crossed his mind, but now that he could... He stood there speechless, unable to form the words that he needed to convey his stress. His eyes burned with frustration, and his vision began to blur as hot tears streamed down his face.

"Hey. Hey, it's okay." Kash pulled him into a hug.

Arms wrapped around him as Kash gently rubbed the back of his head in a soothing motion, whispering that it was okay. Dillan wasn't sure if it was. Everything was a mess, and he needed to go home, but how would he explain being a human? Why was he a human? What was happening? How long would it last? It was all too much for him.

"Dillan, I need you to breathe," Kash whispered.

Dillan closed his eyes, pushing all his questions to the side. For now, it did nothing but make him feel sad. A few minutes passed as they stood there and Dillan collected himself. Dillan felt calmer near Kash. The same feeling he got when he was with Sam or Mary-Anne. Kash felt like family. He may have only known him for a short period of time, but he knew instinctively that Kash was like family. Dillan imagined Kash would be more like his big brother.

Dillan smiled at the notion of Sam and Mary-Anne raising not only him—a black house cat—but a giant mountain lion as well.

He laughed a little at the image in his head.

"Feeling better?" Kash asked.

Dillan nodded as he pulled back. A breeze went by, chilling Dillan to the bone. He shivered. Fur no longer keeping him warm, his teeth began to chatter.

"Here."

Clothes were pressed into his hands. Dillan looked down to see a shirt, pants, and socks. He moved as quickly as he could, trying to put the shirt on.

"That's backward," Kash mentioned.

Dillan tried switching it around, but he got confused and his arm ended up in the same hole as his head. Kash laughed a little before he moved to help. In no time, Dillan was dressed in a long sleeve blue shirt and grey pants that were soft against his skin. Dillan had feared the clothes would feel itchy or uncomfortable. Mary-Anne had tried to put sweaters on him, and he had hated them with a passion. He'd started shredding them before she could even

get them on him. She'd soon stopped buying them, but it had been the worst three weeks.

"There. Doesn't that feel better?"

"My tail feels weird, and why don't you have one?" Dillan asked

"Umm, well, that's something I don't know the answer to. You're the first shifter I've met that shifted back like this, but then again..." Kash went silent for a minute before he shook his head. "How long have you been in your cat form again?"

Dillan shrugged. "My whole life."

Kash blinked at him. "Impossible."

Dillan's dream came crashing through, but he shook it off. It couldn't be true. It was a dream, and that was all. He looked down at his hands, still amazed at seeing hands instead of paws. He shrugged. "I've been living with Mary-Anne and Sam since I was a kitten. Twenty years."

Kash's jaw dropped. "That's... I've never heard of anyone staying in their animal form that long. Not without going crazy."

Kash's gold eyes squinted at Dillan as he stared at him. Dillan stared back, unsure of what Kash was looking for. He did feel like the whole thing was crazy. He was a human and not just a cat. If that qualified him for going crazy, then it made sense.

A smile appeared on Kash's face as he nodded. "You aren't crazy, but this..." Kash's hand went up and down, indicating Dillan's tail and ears. "I'm not sure about, but there has to be someone that knows something." Kash turned and grabbed his bag, slinging it over his shoulders. "Come on, we can go eat and rest at home. I'm sure after all that work, you've got a big appetite."

Dillan stomach grumbled, as if to reassure Kash that yes, in fact, he was hungry. Kash laughed as he turned to walk away. Dillan followed behind, but he staggered as he tried to walk. He tripped over his own feet, trying to keep up with Kash. He fell, his hands going out to catch him before he face-

planted into the ground.

"Crap, are you okay?" Kash helped pull Dillan back up, concern clear on Kash's face as he looked at Dillan.

"Two legs is a lot harder than four," Dillan said.

Kash smiled, and Dillan could see that he was holding back a laugh.

Dillan shook his head. "I had no idea there was so much balance needed for two legs. How do you do it?"

Kash looked confused for a second. "Um, I guess practice. How about you hold onto my shoulder on our way back, so you don't fall again."

Dillan nodded. He was going to need a whole lot of practice with two legs. Before they started to walk again, Kash held a scarf up, wrapping it over Dillan's head and ears. He tied it in the back before looking Dillan in the eyes again.

"There. Now people won't look at us funny as we walk back."

"Sorry," Dillan apologized.

"It's fine," Kash reassured him.

Dillan nodded as they began to walk. They went slowly at first, Dillan still getting used to two legs. It felt strange, but he was quickly getting the hang of it. They walked until they made it the bus stop. No one was there. Kash sat on the bench, but when Dillan tried to sit with his tail in his pants, he ended up sitting on it. It was already uncomfortable, so he glared at the bench before turning to the street to wait.

"Oh yeah," Kash said as he stood.

"You don't have to stand too," Dillan said, feeling guilty.

Kash smiled at him. "It's not a big deal. Plus, the bus is on its way. Might as well be ready."

They stood there, and Dillan couldn't help the smile that stretched across his lips. He may have been lost and missing home, but he'd met the nicest person. He nudged Kash's shoulder in a playful manner. He'd gained a friend, something he had never had before.

"Thank you," Dillan whispered just as the bus arrived.



RHY SAT AT THE BAR, WATCHING AS PATRONS FILED IN. IT STILL WASN'T AS full as a dance club, but there were more people there than the last time he had gone. Morgan was working at the bar and only came over to check on Rhy a few times. Rhy watched him from the corner of his eye. Morgan had seemed fine since they got to the bar, his whole demeanor changing, and he no longer shook with fear. He dealt with the humans at the bar fairly easily and didn't seem to be afraid of them. Granted, he was a shifter and had enhanced strength, but Rhy still watched for any of the patrons who got a little too aggressive toward Morgan.

"Hey, give me two beers," a man shouted.

Rhy could smell the alcohol pouring off the man as if he had been soaked in it. To be able to smell the man so strongly when surrounded by other people made Rhy instinctively cover his nose.

Moving with ease, Morgan grabbed two beers and handed them over to the man. There was no thanks, just a glare before the man went over to grab a seat to watch the game that blared on the TV. Morgan didn't move toward the other customers at the bar, turning to give Rhy a look.

They both stared at each other until Morgan looked away. Rhy turned to see where Morgan was indicating. He was pointing at the man who had just left the bar. That had to be the man Morgan had spoken about, the one who might know something about Mr. Fluffkins.

Rhy nodded that he understood and watched the man hold both beers in his hands, not offering one of them to any of the men next to him. Most of the men didn't seem to be overly friendly with the guy. Rhy sat for a moment longer, studying the man to see if asking the man questions would work. Rhy had the distinct feeling that he would have to be really persuasive to get answers out of him.

Rhy rolled his shoulders, turning his neck from side to side, trying to relieve the tension that had risen since the man walked into the bar. Rhy didn't know why, but he didn't like the man. He wasn't one to question his instincts. He got up and moved toward where the man sat. Rhy stood back until the game went to a commercial, knowing how testy some could get when their game is interrupted. Although, everything inside of Rhy screamed for him to grab the man, take him out back in the alley, and demand answers.

As soon as the commercial for a new shampoo came on, Rhy moved, no longer waiting. The man never saw Rhy coming, his attention turning to speak with the person next to him. Before he could open his mouth, Rhy tapped on the man's shoulder, gaining his attention. Rhy would need to bleach his fingers later, his skin crawling from the brief touch. Bloodshot eyes turned to glare at him, and Rhy plastered a fake smile on his face. He would try the nice approach first.

"Good evening. I—"

"Fuck off. I don't want shit you selling," the man slurred. He turned away from Rhy, giving him his back.

Rhy stopped himself from punching the man's lights out. He took a deep breath before trying again. He once again gained the man's attention. "I'm not selling anything. I have a few questions fo—"

"Man, I'm just trying to enjoy my fucking beer. Why don't you go talk someone else's ear off?"

Just as the man was about to once again give Rhy his back, Rhy's hand shot out, stopping him. He gripped the man's shoulder so hard, a yelp left the man's lips.

Barely holding a growl back, he said, "You're going to answer my questions." Rhy applied more pressure. "Are we clear?"

The man's eyes were wide open, his lips pressed firmly together to keep from shouting out the amount of pain Rhy was giving him. Rhy applied a little more pressure, but if he did anymore, he would break the sleazeball's shoulder. As if realizing the very possibility, the man nodded.

Rhy removed his hand, knowing there would be bruises come morning. Rhy wasn't one to use force or get physical with anyone, but the jerk had had it coming. He'd refused to allow Rhy to take the nice route.

Rhy jerked his head toward the door. The man looked ready to argue and turn back to the game, so Rhy stood straighter, showing off his full height. He glared down at the man, daring him to even try. He may be drunk, but Rhy was sure by the way his eyes went wide, looking up and down Rhy's tall form, that he wasn't drunk enough to think he could take Rhy in a fight.

The man stood slowly and followed behind Rhy as they went outside to talk. The bar wasn't loud, but just in case Rhy needed to get a little more handsy than he liked, he didn't want any of the other patrons trying to get in the way. Although, how relieved the person who the man had been sitting next to looked told Rhy that not many would help the man if Rhy was to rough him up a bit.

The cool crisp air was like a glass of fresh water, clearing Rhy's senses. It smelled better outside, and Rhy took in gulps before turning to glare at the man. He was leaning against the wall of the bar and had taken out a cigarette. He patted his dingy jeans in search of a lighter. Rhy watched the man fumble around.

"You got a light?" the man asked.

Rhy barely held back the eye roll and displeasure from showing on his face. Rhy pulled the picture of the cat out of his pocket and showed it to the man. "Have you seen this cat?"

The man looked angry that Rhy hadn't pulled out a lighter; he looked ready to say something, but Rhy just shoved the picture closer to his face. The man huffed before shrugging. "There are a shit ton of stray cats." He held the cigarette in his mouth, looking anywhere but at Rhy.

"I didn't ask you if there were a bunch of stray cats; I asked if you've seen this one," Rhy said through gritted teeth. The human was testing his patience, and being so close to him, Rhy could smell the stench pouring off the man.

"What the fuck do I look like? The mother fucking cat pol—"

Rhy's hand moved before he could think better of it and wrapped around the man's slender neck. He pressed him firmly against the wall as Rhy moved closer. A growl that was more of his tiger came out.

"Just look at the picture and tell me if you've seen this cat. And don't try to lie." Rhy showed the guy the picture again.

The man's heart beat erratically against Rhy's hand, and the smell of fear tainted the air, driving his predatory side crazy. He wanted to hunt. The man must have seen it in Rhy's eyes, because he was shaking like a leaf and nodding. Rhy loosened his grip in order to let the man speak.

"It ran away. Stole my phone and escaped. Haven't seen it since then," the man rushed out.

Rhy let the man's neck go and stepped back, gaining back his control. "You're saying that a cat stole your phone and ran away?"

The man rubbed his neck, coughing a little. He looked Rhy in the eyes for all of a few seconds before it became too much for him, but he nodded in answer.

Rhy was confused. He wasn't sure how it was possible, but then again, Mrs. Crawford had said Mr. Fluffkins was smart, and by the way the house

was set up, he was more human than cat acting. Rhy stared the man down. He fidgeted, but he didn't change his answer once.

"When did this happen?" Rhy asked.

The man looked up. "You believe me?" He sounded surprised.

Rhy sighed. As ridiculous as it sounded, he knew the man wasn't lying. His heart rate had stayed steady, and he had tried to make eye contact with Rhy.

"When did this happen and where is your place?"

The man scratched the back of his head, as if trying to remember how long ago it had happened. Rhy waited for him to answer. He was sure a knock up against his head wasn't going to make him remember anything faster.

"I think two days ago or maybe three," the man said.

Rhy growled, making the man jump.

"Shit. I had to get a new phone because of that cat." The man's head shot up, and he pointed at Rhy. "You owe me money for your cat stealing my phone."

Rhy lifted a brow, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Or when you find the cat, you can bring the phone back," the man suggested sheepishly.

"What's your address?" Rhy asked.

The man looked ready lie, but Rhy took a menacing step forward, stopping him. Rhy looked down at the shorter man, daring him to try it.

"You know, you don't look like a man who likes cats," the man mentioned as he took a step back from Rhy. He ran into the wall, and he looked everywhere but at Rhy. "Can I get a paper and a pen? I'll give you my address."

Rhy pulled out the notepad that he carried around. He handed it over to the man along with a pen. The man took it and looked around.

"Write against the wall," Rhy uttered.

The man sighed. He was slow to give Rhy his back, especially since earlier he had done it so easily. Rhy wanted to laugh at the change in the man's attitude. The man scribbled on the notepad and passed it back to Rhy.

"Is that it?" the man asked. He shoved his hands in his pockets, the unlit cigarette on the ground.

"Did the cat walk out the front door?" Rhy asked.

The man laughed, as if the question was absurd. "No, it fucking escaped through the kitchen window and ran down the back alley."

"Which direction?"

"What?"

Rhy was going to need a drink after dealing with the man. He was frustrating, and the smell that wafted off him was almost worse than the alleyway.

"Which direction down the alley did the cat go?" Rhy repeated.

The man shrugged. "I don't know. I rushed out of the apartment to go get the damn thing, but it was gone by the time I made it out back."

Rhy felt strangely proud of the cat, but he nodded and turned to leave, happy to be done with the stranger. Rhy pulled his phone out to message Logan that he found a potential lead. Before he put his phone away, he shot a message to Morgan, letting him know he was leaving and not to worry about what had happened earlier.

He got in the car and stared at his phone for a moment longer, contemplating if he should message Kenny. Instead, he messaged Dezi, letting him know what was going on. Rhy put his phone down and started the car, but he hadn't even pulled away from the curb before his phone was ringing.

"Yeah," he answered.

"You telling me a cat stole a phone and escaped from an apartment?" Dezi's shocked voice came over the phone.

"That's what I was told," Rhy said.

He pulled away from the curb and headed down Morganton to get onto the highway. The man didn't live anywhere near the bar, and he'd heard keys jingling while the man was looking for a lighter. Rhy mentally noted that he should text Morgan to make sure the dirtbag wasn't putting others' lives in danger.

"And you believe a cat is capable of all of this?" Dezi sounded skeptical.

Rhy felt skeptical of the whole thing himself, but he had a lead, and he was going to take it. "Not sure, but this is the only lead I've got."

The phone went silent for a second before a loud sigh came across the line. "So, about the wolf you invited today..." Dezi started.

Rhy glanced at the phone before looking back at the road. "Sorry about that. It slipped my mind that he was coming over."

"Is he your boyfriend?" Dezi asked.

"No, he's more of a..." Rhy wasn't sure. He couldn't count him as a friend, since they had only just met. But he already felt a strong friendship with Morgan. The wolf was timid and kind; a far cry from some of the wolves Rhy had met in the past.

"Oh good," Dezi said.

Rhy again glanced at his phone, wishing he could see his friend's face to know what exactly he meant by that. "What?"

"Not to say I wouldn't be happy for you. You definitely need someone who is kind and gentle-hearted, but after what happened with Kenny, I have a feeling you and Morgan wouldn't make a good pair," Dezi informed him.

Rhy was silent for second, thinking over everything that had happened and how Kenny had reacted when he'd moved toward Morgan. As if seeing everything in slow motion playing out in front of him, it was suddenly clear as day, but Rhy wasn't sure if he believed it. It was crazier than the idea of a cat stealing someone's phone and running away.

"You mean..." Rhy couldn't even finish what he was going to say.

He had always wished for it to be true, but a part of him always thought

of it as a dream. Something to always want but would never truly happen. Believing in true mates was kind of like believing in Santa Claus, except Dezi was implying that Morgan and Kenny were true mates. Rhy couldn't argue after the way Kenny had reacted to Morgan; it was so out of character. The only problem was—Rhy wasn't sure how Morgan felt about Kenny. Every time he replayed it, he remembered how Morgan could only shake with fear.

"Are you sure?"

"I've never seen a true mating before, but I'm pretty sure. Have you ever seen Kenny get that way?"

"No," Rhy answered right away.

"Neither have I, and apparently, Logan said it's a huge possibility. I'm inclined to believe him."

Rhy remembered what Logan had said about true mates. "You think Logan's seen it before?"

There was a sigh before Dezi answered. "I don't know, but it's up to Kenny if he's going to pursue this."

"Who would ever turn away from it? Fate has given you someone you're meant to be with for the rest of your life. To have eternal love. Who in their right mind would walk away from that?" Rhy couldn't fathom it. If he ever met his true mate, he would love them no matter what. He was hoping for a male, as he preferred men, but if fate saw fit to match him with a woman, he would love her just as much.

"Yeah, but not everyone is so accepting, Rhy," Dezi said, bringing Rhy back from his daydream of finding his true mate.

"I guess, but everyone deserves love."

"I know," Dezi agreed.

Rhy knew it probably made him seem like a sap, but he truly believed everyone deserved to be cherished and loved.

"I heard you've been staying out late looking for this cat. I know the job is

important, but Rhy, you looked worn out earlier. Have you been getting any sleep or eating?"

Rhy couldn't even tell Dezi the last time he'd gotten a full night of rest or what was the last thing he'd eaten. He was sure he'd grabbed a burger at some time. He usually immersed himself into a job to get the best results, but he'd never spent so much time doing it. He always made time to take care of himself, but finding the cat had taken precedence over everything.

"Eat something, even if it's on the go." There was a sigh. "I know you won't go home and rest. But talk to Logan, tell him to start helping you again."

"Thanks." Rhy knew there was no point in arguing with Dezi. He was just happy that he wasn't being taken off the search or told to give it up. He was so close, he could feel it. Even if he only had a small clue, he just knew it would lead him to the cat. He only hoped once he found the cat, the burning need in him would settle.

Dillan



DILLAN WALKED AROUND THE APARTMENT. IT HAD SEEMED SO LARGE WHEN IN his cat form, but now it fit him perfectly. He jumped onto the couch to sit down, only to hit his head on the ceiling.

"Ouch," he yelped.

"You don't have to jump up on things," Kash laughed.

Dillan glared at him. He went to sit like Kash but remembered his tail; he stopped mid-sit and pulled the pants down and off. His tail swished behind him, and his human fingers touched his tail. He marveled at the difference of how everything felt against his flesh.

"Oh yeah, you know, I could have just made a hole in the pants. You didn't have to strip," Kash said, his hand stretched out and waiting.

Dillan looked down at Kash's waiting hand, and Dillan quickly realized that Kash wanted the pants. He turned around, picked them up from where he'd discarded them on the floor, and handed them over. Kash smiled at him, before leaving the living room.

Dillan followed to see if the rest of the apartment was different. They went into the kitchen, and Dillan ran into the counter, hitting his hip. Dillan

rubbed his hip. He hadn't had that problem before. Then again, he hadn't been as tall as the counter before either.

"You're clumsy," Kash said as he pulled open a drawer.

Dillan peered over Kash's shoulder. He was still shorter than Kash, but he was no longer at Kash's feet. On his tippy toes, he glanced at the drawer that had loose wires, batteries, tape, candles, and a pair of scissors. Kash went for the scissors and turned the pants over in his hand. Dillan watched with fascination.

"Turn around for me," Kash instructed.

Dillan turned around, giving his back to Kash. He glanced over his shoulder. Kash had the pants lined up with Dillan's legs. He had a marker in his mouth.

"Can you hold this side?" Kash muffled out past the marker.

Dillan held up one side of the pants. Once he had a grip on the material, Kash made an 'X' on the back of the pants before capping the marker.

"That's good. You can let it go now."

Dillan did and turned back around, spinning on his feet and nearly slipping. Kash caught him before he hurt himself. The laughter on Kash's face was barely contained. It was going to take Dillan a while before he got used to having a human body. Dillan watched Kash make a hole in the pants. He wondered what it would be like cutting with scissors.

He opened his mouth to ask Kash if he could try when he heard movement outside the apartment. Dillan turned toward the entrance of the kitchen. It showed some of the living room, but the front window was in plain sight. Except Kash had shut the curtains as soon as they'd gotten back so Dillan could take the scarf off his ears.

"What's the matter, Dillan?" Kash asked.

Dillan shrugged. "Sounds like someone is outside."

Kash went still, the apartment quiet as they both listened. Not a second passed before someone banged on the door. When neither one of them moved

to open the door, another bang came crashing against the door.

"Kash!" someone shouted.

Kash growled and rolled his eyes. "What shitty timing," Kash muttered. He looked back down to finish cutting the hole before handing the pants over to Dillan.

Another bang sounded off against the door, louder than the last. The door rattled in protest.

"Should we answer that?" Dillan asked.

Kash shook his head. "It's just my asshole ex. Plus, he doesn't know about shifters, he's human. So him seeing you with cat ears and a tail is definitely a no go."

Dillan gripped the pants in his hands tightly, feeling ashamed that he wasn't able to shift as good as Kash. He couldn't figure out a way to make his ears or his tail disappear.

"Sorry," he whispered.

The banging persisted, but Dillan paid no attention to it. Kash's hand on his shoulder had his attention.

"It's not your fault. I'm not an alpha, and although, I've never seen this happen before, doesn't mean something is wrong with you. We just have to figure it out. I'm just using it as an excuse to ignore my ex, but truth be told, I'd rather never see him again." Kash smiled.

Dillan stared into his golden eyes, seeing the truth. He sighed and nodded. He'd never had to deal with an ex, but from how the man was shouting and pounding his fist against the door, Dillan would avoid him as well. He had watched shows where an ex would show up unannounced. It usually ended with the girl being upset, and the guy in the friendzone knocking the ex out or doing something to make him leave before changing from the friend to the boyfriend.

Dillan looked at Kash. Was he supposed to do that? Was he supposed to go push the ex away and tell him Kash never wanted to see him again? There

were a few issues with it. One being that Kash wasn't a girl and was very much capable of handling things, but the most important being, Dillan didn't see Kash in that way.

He had never felt the feelings of love or wanting someone, but he was sure that what he felt for Kash wasn't the feelings the humans on TV gushed about. Dillan slipped his pants back on, his tail still trapped. He tried to maneuver it out, but it was only frustrating him. His hand didn't fit in the hole.

"Don't, you'll tear it and then it'll be too big. Pull them down just a little bit," Kash instructed.

Dillan did, and Kash lightly touched Dillan's tail, pulling it through the hole. Dillan pulled the pants back up to his waist. The clothes felt strange around his tail, but it wasn't terrible. He preferred it over having his tail down his pants, pressing against his legs.

"Thank you," Dillan said.

The banging had stopped, and Dillan turned toward the door, expecting the next thing was for it to go flying across the living room.

"He finally gave up," Dillan said.

Kash shrugged, moving over to the refrigerator to pull food out. "What do you want to eat?"

Dillan's mouth watered. He wondered if the food would taste different as well. "Anything you make is good with me."

Dillan looked around the kitchen for the table, but didn't see one. Instead, he moved to the counter. He wondered if he would get in trouble for sitting on the counter. He was no longer a cat, but was it impolite for humans to sit on the counters as well? Dillan looked over his shoulder at Kash. He was moving around the kitchen humming a tune Dillan had never heard before. Dillan smiled. Kash seemed to enjoy cooking. Mary-Anne had hummed when she baked cookies. The memory of her had him looking down at the floor.

"What's wrong? I can feel your sadness from over here."

Dillan turned to face Kash. "I miss Mary-Anne and Sam."

He closed his eyes, fighting back the tears that burned the back of his eyes. He missed Sam the most, since he hadn't seen him in so long.

Kash's warm hands pulled on Dillan's arm, and he opened his eyes. His vision of Kash was blurry with the unshed tears. Kash pulled him into a hug, and Dillan wrapped his arms around Kash, pulling him closer as he let the tears stream down his face. He pressed his face to Kash's shoulder, letting the sobs rack through his body. All the while, Kash rubbed soothing circles on his back.

Dillan had no idea how long they stood there or how long he had cried, but the tears had dried up. He pulled back from Kash, and he wiped his face, coming away with snot and tears. Dillan looked at his hand with disgust. "I need to wash my hands."

Kash laughed. "And your face." Kash pointed toward the sink.

Dillan washed his hands and splashed some water on his face before turning back around to face Kash. Dillan opened his mouth to speak when a loud crashing sound came from down the hall. Kash's surprised face flashed in front of him before they were both heading toward the noise.

Dillan thought about the movies where the people headed toward the noise and usually died, but they weren't in some horror movie. Kash opened the door, and Dillan was right behind him. He wasn't sure how much help he would be, but he was there if Kash needed him.

A groan from the floor near the window caught their attention. They both turned to look over. A man with dark brown hair and tan skin lay on the floor.

"Eric, what the fuck?" Kash exclaimed.

Eric's brown eyes shot up, his brows knitted together in anger. "You don't know how to answer the door, because your fucking some two—"

Eric's eyes went from Dillan's face to the top of his head where his ears

twitched.

Kash stepped in front, blocking Eric's view of Dillan. "Who I decide to be with has nothing to do with you. You gave that up when you went around fucking everything with two legs in this town. Now get out."

Kash backed up, pushing Dillan farther behind him and pointed toward the door.

"I told you, they are lying to you! And at least I didn't fuck some weirdo who gets off on wearing cat ears. If you like role-playing, you should've told me."

Dillan flinched at the cat ear comment, feeling ashamed for something he didn't know how to change.

"You can't think I'm that stupid," Kash commented.

Dillan peered past Kash to look at Eric. He stood at his full height, and he was taller than Kash and Dillan. His hulking muscles and the way he glared daggers at Kash had Dillan gripping Kash's shirt for comfort.

"I never sai—"

"You never said much of anything, which is why I dealt with you for so long, but I'm honestly tired of your bullshit. You're paying to fix that window, and you can get the fuck out before I call the police," Kash demanded.

Eric looked ready to argue.

"Now!" Kash shouted.

Dillan could feel the anger rolling off Kash, his body tense, his shoulders drawn up, and his fists balled.

"If you would've answered the door, I wouldn't have had to break through the window," Eric said.

Kash huffed out a breath. "Or you could have left."

"How can I when you won't give me another chance. And now you want to be with that," Eric said with disdain in his voice as he pointed toward Dillan.

A growl that didn't sound entirely human erupted from Kash. The sound clearly a warning, but Eric ignored it. Dillan wondered if the human was an idiot. Kash could turn into a mountain lion, and the human was standing there as if they were in his territory.

"Look, I know Amy said som—"

"Amy?" Kash shouted. He shook his head, his golden hair swaying and tickling Dillan's nose. "Drake. Linsey. Kevin. Blake. Briana. Fuck, I could keep listing, but I think you get the point. I don't care for any of your excuses, because they are all lies. So do us both a favor and leave."

Eric said nothing, and the room was silent as they all stood there. Dillan wasn't sure if he should speak. Even if he did talk to dispel the uncomfortable silence, what was he supposed to say? He had only watched real human interactions on TV and Mary-Anne and Sam. It didn't prepare him for everything that was happening in front of him. Eric looked as if he was about to speak again, and Dillan watched as he stared a minute longer at Kash before turning away and heading toward the door.

Where they stood.

Dillan watched him cautiously as he stopped right in front of them.

"Don't say anything. Just get out," Kash said harshly.

Eric looked past Kash, giving Dillan a death glare before walking out of the room. They both stood there in silence as they listened to Eric stomp past them.

"Once you're done with *that*, make sure you give me a call. I'm the only person who could ever please you," Eric said. He gave Dillan another glare before turning and leaving the apartment. The door slammed shut, announcing his exit.

Dillan focused on Kash, trying to see if he was okay. His ex seemed like a real jerk.

Before Dillan could say anything, Kash was moving, yanking drawers open and pulling a backpack from under his bed. He stuffed clothes into the

bag haphazardly, not once stopping to look at Dillan. Dillan watched him as he grabbed a second bag from under the bed. Dillan wanted to look under Kash's bed to see if there were more backpacks stored away, but he refrained from doing so. Kash zipped the second bag and finally looked up at him.

"We're leaving now," Kash announced.

Dillan blinked at him in confusion. "What?" He felt as if he'd missed something.

Kash stopped to look up, and Dillan saw the hurt in Kash's eyes. He wanted to beat up the asshole ex. He was sure he could bite and claw him up pretty good.

"I don't want to be here when he decides he can convince me that he deserves a second chance." Kash laughed humorlessly. "More like tenth chance," he muttered. He turned back to the packing, stuffing clothes in haphazardly.

Dillan watched for a second longer as Kash rushed through packing, unsure what he was supposed to say to reassure his friend. Kash passed him a backpack and herded him out of the room and toward the living room. He detoured to the kitchen. Dillan heard him messing around in the fridge before he appeared once more in the living room.

"I'm guessing you came from somewhere," Kash said as he stopped by the closet door near the entrance.

Dillan nodded.

Kash turned around to face him, a coat and hat in his hands. "So?" Kash asked. His lips dipped. "Or did you run away?"

"I didn't run away," Dillan rushed to say.

Kash's face changed from a frown to a smile. "So how in the world did you end up here?"

Dillan felt his face heat up as he cast his eyes down to the carpet. A hand landed on his shoulder, and he looked up into Kash's eyes. There was a reassuring smile there waiting to listen to him.

"I got lost," he whispered.

"Lost," Kash said, as if he hadn't heard Dillan correctly.

Dillan balled his fists and squared his shoulders. "Yeah, I went outside for the first time by myself, and I got lost." He crossed his arms, daring Kash to say something about it.

He expected to hear laughter, but instead, Kash just nodded and handed over the coat and hat. Dillan turned to walk out the door.

"We can go to a hotel tonight before taking you back home," Kash said.

Dillan slipped the hat over his ears. It was big enough it didn't squash his ears down. The jacket looked large, and one whiff of the coat told Dillan it wasn't Kash's. He put his arms in and tried to button it. Kash helped him after Dillan struggled to get his fingers to cooperate.

"Thank you," Dillan said.

Kash shrugged. "How old are you?"

The question wasn't absurd, but it caught Dillan off guard. "Umm... I think nineteen or twenty." He shrugged, not knowing exactly. "Sam brought me home to Mary-Anne eighteen years ago, but I have no idea my actual age."

Kash nodded once more, accepting what Dillan said without further questions. "Okay, let's go." Kash turned to glance over his shoulder. "Try to keep your tail under there."

They walked out of the apartment and into the parking lot toward an old blue pickup truck that looked as if it had seen better days. Dillan stopped following as nerves attacked. He was all of a sudden not sure if going back was a good idea. He stared at the truck. He wanted to go home to see Mary-Anne again. To be held in her arms once more.

Kash noticed that he wasn't behind him and turned around to stare at him. "What's the matter?" Kash asked.

Dillan sighed. "I was just a cat there, and now, I'm this." He indicated his body—his very human body, minus the cat ears and tail.

Kash tilted his head back, looking up at the stars. Dillan followed, not sure what they were looking for. Maybe the answers would be in the sky. He didn't see any and didn't know what to do. Was he to turn back into a cat to go home? He wanted to go home, but he wasn't sure if he wanted to give up walking around on two legs just yet. There was still so much he hadn't talked about or done as a human.

"Then we go there. If you don't want to be there, we'll find somewhere else. It will also give me time to find an alpha that can help you with your change," Kash said.

Dillan looked back at Kash. It didn't go unnoticed by Dillan that Kash had volunteered himself, making Dillan's problem his as well.

"Thank you," he said.

"Come on." Kash gestured for them to head toward the truck.

Dillan followed this time. When they made it back to his little town, hopefully he would have an idea of what he wanted to do. One thing he knew for sure was he wanted to see Mary-Anne once more, and hopefully, Sam would be back.



RHY WALKED UP AND DOWN THE ALLEYWAY BEHIND THE APARTMENT BUILDING multiple times, and each time, he didn't find the cat. It was frustrating. He kept thinking he was getting closer, but in actuality, he was nowhere near finding the cat. It felt like the cat knew he was searching for him and ran every time Rhy got even a little bit of a clue. He knew it wasn't the case, but he still felt the anger of not being able to find the cat.

Rhy stood behind the apartments for a moment longer before calling it quits, staying out any longer wasn't going to make the cat magically appear. He did a once-over before turning and getting back in his car. He'd spent two hours in the alley looking for any hints of the cat. He hadn't found any.

He sighed as he started the car and headed back home. Tomorrow he would go check on Mrs. Crawford. He wasn't giving up just yet, but he needed to tell her what he knew so far. Which wasn't a whole lot, except that he had no idea where her cat was.

His hands gripped the steering wheel tightly as he drove home, trying to think of all the places the cat could've run off too. The fact that it stole a phone made it seem like it was maybe smart enough to find its way back

home.

Rhy sighed at the ridiculous notion. His phone rang next to him. He glanced over, seeing that Logan was calling him, and picked up the phone, pressing the green button to answer. Logan's voice came crackling over the car's speakers.

"Where in the hell are you?"

"I'm on my way back home," Rhy replied.

"Dezi said something about a cat stealing a phone."

Rhy sighed. "Yeah, but I have no idea what he would do with a phone."

Logan's laughter came over the line. "Fuck, maybe call Mrs. Crawford and see if she got a call that was nothing but meows," he joked.

Rhy said nothing. He wasn't in a joking mood. He was too disappointed that he still hadn't found the cat. If the cat had somehow called Mrs. Crawford, it would help him more than searching the back allies and asking drunks.

"Tough crowd. Are you angry about what happened with Kenny today or is this cat search getting to you?" Logan asked.

Rhy stared at the road. There weren't many cars out driving at that time of night. He sighed. He felt as if that was all he'd been doing as of late. He wasn't angry about what had happened with Kenny and Morgan at Dezi's. He'd honestly forgotten about it while he was searching for the cat. All his frustrations were about the cat search. Or, really, the lack of the results of the search.

"So, true mates," Rhy said, trying to distract himself from his lack of answers and the overwhelming feeling of disappointment he had in himself.

Logan went quiet on the other side, and Rhy glanced at the phone. Logan was never quiet for long, but Rhy was starting to notice that the few times Rhy brought up true mates Logan clammed up or got distant. He contemplated changing the subject again, but had nothing to talk about besides the search he was currently failing at and Kenny possibly finding his

true mate.

"Yeah, I don't think Kenny expected that," Rhy said.

"I don't think anyone expected that," Logan said.

That was true. Rhy sure hadn't. "True. So now they get to know each other," Rhy said. He was happy for his friend.

"I guess," Logan muttered.

Rhy heard the skeptical tone loud and clear. He felt there was something to the story. He opened his mouth to ask about it, but Logan interrupted him.

"Make sure you eat something when you get home. I want to see a picture of the food. Dezi said you also haven't been eating," Logan rushed out before a beep alerted Rhy of Logan hanging up.

Rhy shook his head. Logan acted like a mother hen sometimes. His stomach growled, as if reminding him that he hadn't fed it in a while. He hadn't had much of an appetite. Although he was hungry, nothing seemed appetizing. Rhy glanced around him and saw a few fast food places. He knew if he got home, all he would do was crawl into his bed and close his eyes and sleep.

He pulled over into the drive-thru of one of the places that served burgers every way possible. There were no cars in front of him or behind him.

"What can I get you?" the voice over the speaker asked.

Rhy looked at the time. It was nearly midnight; no wonder the worker sounded tired. He looked over the menu quickly, choosing randomly. "I'll have the number three with a large fries."

He pulled the greasy burger out and took a picture of it before taking a tentative bite.

It tasted like cardboard.

He quickly washed it down with water. He glared at the burger as if it was made of garbage. His stomach tightened from hunger. He sighed and took another bite, hoping the food would get some flavor. It tasted the same: flavorless grease. He took three more bites before calling it quits. He tossed

the rest of the burger back into the bag. He thought about trying the fries, but thought better of it. He had no idea when it had occurred, but food had taken on a bland taste lately.

Rhy sat in the parking lot, trying to figure out what was wrong with him and if he needed to see a doctor. Food tasted terrible, his sleep was restless, and he felt as if he was on edge more often than not. It didn't sound like any sickness he had ever heard of. Shifters didn't get human illnesses, so he knew it wasn't the flu or the cold.

He rested his head on the headrest and closed his eyes. It had all started with his search for the cat. Maybe it was too much for him, and he should tell Mrs. Crawford he couldn't do the job? Even as he thought it, he knew he wouldn't be able to stop even if he was to tell Mrs. Crawford that he needed to. He knew that he wouldn't.

Rhy opened his eyes. The only thing to do was find the cat and hope everything went back to normal for him. He balled up the paper bag with the remainder of the burger and french fries. He started the car back up and pulled close to the trash can, tossing the food in the can before pulling back out onto the road and heading home.



RHY WOKE up and ground the palms of his hands against his eyes, rubbing the sleep from them. He picked up his phone to check the time. He had slept a few hours, but it felt as if he hadn't slept at all. His body ached with fatigue.

He groaned as he sat up, moving his legs and sitting on the edge of the bed. He ran his fingers through his hair, looking down at the floor. Glaring at the carpet and hoping for an answer to questions he didn't know. He sighed as he finally worked himself into standing.

He moved to the bathroom, glancing over at the mirror and seeing his thick beard on his face. He hadn't shaved in a few days, since he'd taken the

job to find the cat, but it looked like he'd been working on the job with no sleep or proper care for weeks. Rhy's eyes traveled down to where his razor laid, but his hand didn't move to pick it up. Instead, he moved toward the shower, turning it on.

He listened to the water as he waited for it to warm. He felt worse than he had the day before. Although he knew he'd slept, it felt as if he hadn't. He'd eaten the day before, but his stomach still clenched with emptiness, and the thought of food wasn't pleasing. He stripped his underwear off and got into the shower, hoping the water would wash away whatever was wrong with him.

Five minutes later, he was freshly showered, dressed, and still felt as if he could crawl back into the bed, close his eyes, and never move again. He heaved a heavy sigh as he grabbed his keys and walked past his kitchen. He hadn't been in there in a while, and the fridge probably only had expired food. He kept walking until he was down the stairs and outside, walking toward his car.

He got in and sat there. Where was he supposed to go? He was out of ideas on where to look or where to even begin. He rested his head on the steering wheel. He knew giving up wasn't an option. He sat up, starting the car.

The only thing to do was start from the beginning. He left his apartment parking lot and headed toward Mrs. Crawford's house.

Rhy arrived in record time. The dread that had been weighing him down lifted slightly as he approached the door. He eagerly knocked on the door, waiting patiently for Mrs. Crawford to open it. He didn't have to wait long. The door creaked open slowly. There stood a sleepy-eyed Mrs. Crawford in a fluffy purple robe.

"Oh Rhy, I wasn't expecting you. Come on in," she offered as she moved to the side.

He hesitated for a second, realizing just how early he had shown up

unannounced to someone's house.

"Come on, you're letting all my heat out," she demanded.

Rhy moved quickly into the house and closed the door. He felt a nervous twitch in his hands as he watched Mrs. Crawford move slowly down the hall.

"You want coffee?" she offered.

Rhy wasn't a huge coffee drinker, and he wasn't sure if his stomach would be able to handle it. "No, thank you. I'm sorry I arrived so early. I didn't realize what time it was."

"No worries. Can't spend all day in bed; makes the bones weak," she said as she kept walking. She stopped before turning the corner, looking back at Rhy. "You look like you could use some breakfast. You like scrambled eggs or sunny side up?"

Rhy didn't want to be rude. He had already said no to the coffee, so he smiled at the older lady and her generous offer. "Scrambled is fine, ma'am."

She nodded with a smile before turning the corner and going into the kitchen. Rhy looked around the small home, trying to remember why he'd come over to Mrs. Crawford's home. It had been such a good idea, but he hadn't thought it through. They had already asked all the questions they could and gotten enough pictures of the cat that Rhy could easily start a photo album and still have some left over.

Rhy looked around the house before moving into the small living room and looking at all the pictures on the wall. His eyes easily went to the black cat that sat in each picture.

Rhy admitted that the cat was absolutely beautiful, and if he was to ever get a pet cat, it would be one that looked just like Mr. Fluffkins. He stood there for a moment longer, looking at the picture before walking down the hall. He found himself with his hand on the doorknob of the room with the tantalizing scent. He fought with himself, his mind screaming for him to go to the kitchen, but he stood there clutching the door handle like his life depended on it.

His stomach knotted as he turned the handle and entered the room. The smell was faint, but it was still there. It surrounded him. Rhy took in big gulps of the air in the room, taking in the wonderful scent. He closed his eyes as a feeling of calmness rushed through him.

He moved farther into the room and sat on the bed. His whole body relaxing, he lay against the soft cover. It had been so long since he felt so calm and relaxed. He could feel himself drifting off, unable to fight the sleep that pulled at him.



RHY WOKE SLOWLY, the smell of bacon and eggs waking him. He opened his eyes slowly. He didn't recognize his surroundings even a little bit. He sat straight up. In his confused state, he nearly knocked over the food tray with a plate full of bacon and eggs and two fluffy golden pancakes. It all came crashing back in a whirlwind of images. Rhy blinked, eyes traveling around the bare room.

"I'm in trouble for this," he whispered.

He'd fallen asleep at a client's home. He picked up a piece of bacon as his stomach growled. He prepared himself to taste sand, the taste he'd associated with food lately. The burst of delicious, crunchy bacon had him moaning in satisfaction. He inhaled the second piece before he knew it. He moved on to the eggs, eating forkfuls. Before he could start on the pancakes, his phone rang. He reached into his pocket, pulling out his phone and answering on the third ring.

"Yeah," he said, mouth still full of food.

"It sounds like you're eating already," Logan said.

Rhy swallowed the food in his mouth. "Yeah. What's up?"

"We need to go over what we know about this cat and find it. Plus, I'm hungry for lunch," Logan said.

Rhy pulled the phone back from his face, looking at the time. He'd slept for three hours. He shook his head. He was making all type of mistakes.

"I'm heading to your place to pick you up n—"

"No, that's okay. I'll meet you. Where do you want to go? My treat," Rhy rushed out.

"Granger's Cavern. Be there in fifteen," Logan said before ending the call.

Rhy looked at his pancakes with longing. He grabbed one and took a bite. Even without syrup, the pancake was good. He stood in the bedroom and couldn't help but look around the room. Why he felt so relaxed in the room was puzzling. He picked the tray up with the plate and left the room. He finished the pancake before he made it to the kitchen where he found Mrs. Crawford sitting at the kitchen table.

"Sorry, I—"

"No need for apologies. Anyone with two eyes could see you needed sleep." She peered over from her crossword puzzle to look at him. "You finish that pancake before you leave."

"Yes, ma'am." Rhy took the other pancake, eating it in three bites. He took his dishes to the sink and washed his plate and fork before turning back to face Mrs. Crawford. He wondered if how he felt now was how people usually felt around their grandmothers or moms. The warm, accepting feeling. He wanted to hug her and thank her. All she'd done was let him sleep and gave him breakfast, but it felt like so much more.

"Sam would've liked you," Mrs. Crawford said.

Rhy was caught off guard, not expecting that at all. "I wish I could've met him."

She didn't say anything, only nodding like it was too much for her to verbalize. "If you need anything, you come back here anytime. I know you're working hard to find Mr. Fluffkins."

Rhy nodded. He was working hard, and he really wanted to find her cat, but it felt more personal than just finding someone else's pet.

Rhy left shortly after, determined to find the cat more than ever. He got in his car, starting it and heading into town to meet Logan. He didn't have any leads, but he hoped that maybe they could brainstorm some new ideas.

They technically only had a few days left to find the cat. Rhy wondered if he could possibly ask Kenny for more time. He hadn't talked to his friend since *the incident*. He vowed to go check up on Kenny after the lunch with Logan.

Dillan

DILLAN SAT IN THE FRONT SEAT OF THE TRUCK, SEATBELT HARNESSSED ACROSS his chest. He kept moving it, because it rubbed against his neck. It was annoying, but Kash had said it was a safety thing. Dillan fidgeted with the seatbelt for a moment longer until the driver side door opened, and Kash hopped into the seat and put his own seatbelt on.

"Okay, so where to?" Kash asked as he started up the truck.

"Sync Valley. I can type in the address if you have a phone," Dillan said.

Kash grimaced. "Sorry, I don't . Never really needed one, but I do know where Sync Valley is. it's about an hour and a half from here." Kash pulled out to the street, leaving the small motel they had stayed in for the night behind.

"Wow, I really got lost," Dillan whispered.

There was laughter coming from next to him. "Yes, if you were walking, I'd say it would take almost two days, if not longer."

Dillan's hands and legs ached just remembering how much walking he had done. He looked down at his hands, turning them over, so used to looking at black paws, but now staring at light brown skin. It was surreal that he had a

human body.

The truck was silent for a while, and Dillan watched the scenery pass by. All the colors blended together as he imagined what Mary-Anne's reaction to seeing him would be. The only logical thing would be for her to freak out or have a heart attack. Dillan sighed as he closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against the cool glass.

"What's the matter now?" Kash asked.

Dillan lifted his head and looked at Kash, waiting for Kash to glance his way.

"What's with the pout?"

Dillan scrunched his eyebrows. He wasn't pouting. At least, he didn't think he was.

Kash laughed before reaching over and lowering the visor in front of Dillan. A small mirror was on the backside. A blue eyed, light brown skinned man stared back at Dillan. With this black lashes and black hair. Dillan lifted his hand to touch his face, watching the reflection do the same.

"Wow," he exclaimed.

"Didn't know you were that pretty, huh?" Kash asked.

Dillan turned to look at Kash, and he wasn't ugly at all either with his golden hair and olive skin. Dillan thought his best feature were his golden eyes. They were like the sun.

"You're pretty too," Dillan said.

Kash burst out laughing. "Thanks. You feeling better now?"

Dillan had forgotten why he had been sullen moments ago. He smiled at Kash, knowing that he'd done that to cheer him up. "Yeah." He lifted the visor and sat back in his seat. "How come you aren't with an alpha?"

Kash glanced over with a puzzled look on his face. "Ummmm... Well, do you mean why not in a pride?" Kash clarified.

Dillan nodded but quickly answered when he remembered that Kash was watching the road. "Yes, that's what I meant."

Kash's fingers drummed against the steering wheel. "Well, the pride I grew up in wasn't all that accepting of my preferences."

Dillan tilted his head to the side, trying to figure out what Kash meant. "What?"

Kash sighed. "I'm gay, as you know after my crazy ex broke through the window."

Dillan had known that, but he didn't understand why Kash's pride would kick him out. Kash glanced over at him before sighing again.

"I can tell by your face you have no idea why that would be an issue."

"I don't," Dillan said.

"Well, they had a big issue with it, and it didn't help that I brought home some shitty boyfriends," Kash said.

"So we can't go see your alpha, because he doesn't like your boyfriends?" Dillan asked, hoping he'd gotten it right.

Kash opened his mouth a few times before closing it with an audible click. He blew out a breath. He didn't look angry; he just sat there driving. "Yeah, I guess you can say that."

"You broke up with your boyfriend. Can't you go back now?" Dillan was curious.

Kash shook his head. "Doesn't work that way."

Dillan turned to look out the window again, feeling like his questions were making Kash a little upset. He hadn't told Dillan not to ask questions, but the way his shoulders tensed and his hands tightened around the steering wheel told Dillan he shouldn't dig any further.

They drove in silence the rest of the time, and Dillan fell asleep at some point. Sleeping for only a few minutes, he woke just in time to see the sign welcoming them to Sync Valley, displayed on a wooden sign with purple and yellow flowers around the writing.

Dillan sat up with excitement, looking around to see if he recognized anything, hoping to see something he might remember from some of the trips

Sam took him out on. Of course, he hadn't paid much attention to his surroundings.

His stomach growled. He looked around for a clock and wondered if it was time for lunch. They'd had breakfast at the motel, but only a granola bar and an apple. Dillan was hungry again. He kept quiet as he looked around for familiar places.

"Why don't we stop and get some food first, then we can ask someone where your house is. You can give them the address and we can go," Kash suggested.

"Yeah," Dillan said eagerly. He was happy about the idea of food and an easy way to go home. He looked out the window. Everything looked so different to him. There were little things that looked familiar, but nothing he could distinctly point out and know which way to turn to go home.

"Here. Why not try this place?" Kash pointed to a small restaurant. It had covered tables and chairs outside. Of course, no one sat outside with how cold it was.

Dillan's stomach growled, answering for him. He smiled, reaching for the handle, only to stop short as the seatbelt held him in place. He glared at the annoying contraption.

There was laughter as Kash reached over and unbuckled him. After a second of pressing down on the red button, Dillan was free. He smiled a thank you as he reached for the door handle.

"Remember to keep your tail under the coat and no taking your hat off," Kash said.

Dillan's fingers went to the hat, pulling it down a little more to secure it on his head. They both got out of the truck, the crisp, cool air rushing past Dillan and making him wish he had fur as he pulled the jacket tighter around his body.

"Granger's Cavern," Kash read.

Dillan turned to read the sign clearly displayed on the front.

"You know if it's any good?" Kash asked.

Dillan shrugged. "Mary-Anne always cooks, and if not, then it's usually pizza."

Kash face scrunched up, his eyebrows pinching together.

"What?" Dillan asked.

"Pizza? I doubt this town has an amazing pizza joint."

Dillan laughed. "I don't know. We only had that one type of pizza, so, to me, it was amazing, but you might have to make your own pizza."

Kash shook his head as they headed into the restaurant. There were barely any people inside, just an older couple sitting next to the windows, enjoying their food.

"The signs say to seat yourself. Come on," Kash instructed. As they both moved farther into the restaurant, the smell of fresh bread and cooking food had Dillan rushing to find a seat. He moved past Kash, dashing to a table and sitting quickly, excited to eat some of the delicious food he could clearly smell.

"Eager much?" Kash asked as he sat. "I feel a little offended you weren't this eager about my food."

Dillan eyed Kash. "Yes, I was, and you know it."

Kash laughed just as a woman with dark brown hair and kind brown eyes came to their table.

"Never seen you two before," she mentioned. She had two long pieces of paper that had a shine to them. "Since you two aren't regulars, I'll give you a few with the menus." She gave each of them one of the pieces of paper and walked away.

Kash said thanks as she left. Dillan looked over the piece of paper she called a *menu*. He knew how to read, and he could thank Sam for that. The older man had started reading to him, and he'd picked it up fairly easily. Obviously, Sam hadn't known he was teaching Dillan, but still, Dillan was thankful for the lessons.

"Everything looks so good," said Dillan, salivating over the options.

"Thank you," Kash said, glancing down at his menu.

Dillan put his down too, eager for the nice lady to come back, so he could eat. He looked around for her but didn't see her. Just as he was turning back to face Kash, his eyes caught sight of the greenest eyes he'd ever seen. He locked eyes with the man who stood in the doorway. It was as if something in Dillan called out to the man. He wanted to go to the man and touch him, to be near him. He needed to know the man.

A scent stronger than the food being made in the kitchen filled Dillan's nostrils. Dillan took a big whiff, inhaling the scent, and he went from being hungry to downright ravenous. But it wasn't food he wanted. He wanted the tall, handsome redhead that stood there with his eyes wide in surprise and his mouth slightly gaping open. His stomach pulled, and it felt as he was jumping off a bookshelf.

"Who is that?" Dillan whispered.

"Other shifters," Kash whispered. He was up and next to Dillan in seconds. He stood slightly in front of Dillan, standing tall as if to shield Dillan from the gorgeous man.

Dillan easily peered around him. A growl stronger than the one Kash had emitted the night before pierced the room. A growl that should have scared Dillan, but only made him want the man closer to him. A hand appeared on the man's chest, and for the first time, Dillan glanced at the man next to the gorgeous stranger. He was shorter, and his hand was splayed on the other man's chest as he whispered words to him.

It made Dillan's blood boil to see someone else touching the man. He turned his eyes away from Dillan, breaking their connection. A hiss emitted from him, making them all look at him.

Dillan didn't care for anyone else's attention, he only wanted the man's eyes on him. Green eyes once again locked with his. Dillan moved before he thought better of it, some instinct driving him to be closer. He felt Kash's

hand wrap around his arm, stopping him from going to the man. Dillan hissed angrily. How dare Kash stop him from moving toward the man! Couldn't he understand there was something pulling him closer to the man? He felt like if he didn't go and touch him, he may just lie there and die. Just the thought of not being able to get near the man was driving Dillan insane.

"Dillan," Kash whispered in surprise.

Talking was beyond him, and Dillan shifted without thought, without trying. His arm slipped from Kash's grasp as he once again turned into his cat form. On the ground, he jumped onto a table and moved from one to another until he was standing in front of the man, inches away.

"Shit!" shouted the man standing next to Dillan's target.

"Dillan!" Kash called.

There was a gasp, but Dillan paid no mind to them as he leapt and landed on the tall man's shoulder. He pressed his face against the man's head, breathing in the heady scent. He purred. The man smelled like nothing he'd ever smelled before.

Dillan looked down at the hand still on the man's chest. His claws out, he swiped at the hand, wanting it off. The hand moved before he could make contact. Dillan hissed another warning at the shorter man.

"It's all right," said the man that smelled so good, his hand reaching up and petting Dillan.

Dillan purred louder, happy to have the man touching him, but Dillan didn't want just his fur touched. A hand wrapped around him, picking him up and off the man's shoulder. Dillan stared into deep green eyes, and he shifted in a fluid motion, his feet touching the ground.

"Hello," Dillan greeted.



'HELLO?' WAS THIS GUY SERIOUS? RHY THOUGHT.

Rhy swallowed as he stared at the naked flesh of none other than Mr. Fluffkins, his mate. How in the world had that happened?

He held his true mate in his hands, and yet he was frozen in place. He had played the moment over in his head millions of times of how he would react when meeting his true mate. Nothing about the situation was how he had imagined it. Yet here he was, with his true mate. A very naked mate.

Rhy remembered they were in public and instantly stripped his shirt off in order to cover his mate. His mate's head popped through the hole of his shirt, cat ears twitching. Rhy pulled the rest of his shirt down, his finger brushing against something soft. Soft like fur.

Rhy blinked a few times, confused by the half shift. He'd never seen someone do it before.

"Maybe we should get out of here," Logan whispered, getting Rhy's attention.

As soon as Rhy turned to talk to him, a hiss came from his mate, making Rhy look at him. His mate was glaring at Logan. His black eyebrows creased

together, and his blue eyes filled with anger as he stared Logan down. Rhy wanted to laugh, but he had to agree with Logan that being out in public wasn't the best thing.

Luckily, there was only one old couple in the corner of the restaurant. They weren't looking at them, but Rhy had to wonder what they'd seen. They weren't making a fuss about it, so he decided to leave it.

He turned to regard the man that had touched his mate. The tall blonde was still looking worriedly at Rhy's mate. He didn't know him, but he could smell the guy, and he was a shifter. If Rhy had to guess, he was going for lion. He hoped that he wasn't his mate's boyfriend, because he would be sorely mistaken if he thought Rhy would give up his true mate.

Rhy looked back down at his mate. He needed to thank the gods that he was blessed with someone so beautiful. He had light brown skin, deep blue eyes, and high cheekbones.

"Rhy," Logan pleaded.

Rhy shook his head. He could see clearly, but it was as if nothing else mattered but his mate. He almost felt crazed by it.

"Let's leave," he said. He gripped his mate's hand, his own nearly twice as big as his mate's. He didn't pull, just lightly led the way, his mate easily following behind him.

"Here, put this on," the blond-haired man said.

Rhy turned just in time to see the man touching his mate, and his tiger was furious. He moved faster than the man could see and grabbed his wrist, using so much strength he felt as if he could easily break the man's wrist.

"Mine," he growled. He had never sounded so angry, but everything in him wanted to rip the man apart for touching his mate. His true mate.

"We shouldn't touch either one of them," Logan suggested.

Rhy agreed, but he was too busy staring the blond man down, puffing up his chest. If he was to fight for his mate, he would easily kill the man without a second thought. Golden eyes glared back, never breaking contact.

"If you want everyone in this damn town to see his ears, then, by all means, keep the hat off, but don't say I didn't warn you," the man said.

Rhy heard him—he even understood what the man said and agreed—but he still didn't want the man touching his mate. He looked over to the hat in the man's hands and snatched it away. He turned toward his mate. He'd never let go of Rhy's hand and was patiently standing there, his eyes boring into Rhy. He smiled, his stare never wavering.

Rhy gently put the hat on his mate's head, covering his ears from view. The blond man held a jacket out to Rhy, and Rhy was grateful he didn't try to touch his mate again. Rhy wasn't usually violent. He may be a tiger shifter, but he wasn't one that was usually ruled by his baser instincts. But with his true mate so close, he seemed unable to control that side. He let go of his mate's hand for a second, helping him into the jacket so that not only was his bare lower half fully covered but his tail as well.

Rhy entwined their fingers as he led his mate to his car.

"Uh, Dillan," the blond called out.

Rhy's mate turned.

"It's okay, Kash," Dillan said. His blue eyes stared back at Rhy. "I don't know why I'm drawn to him, but I do know he wouldn't do anything to hurt me."

Rhy's heart ached for his mate. He had only just met Dillan, but already he knew he would give his life for him. He would never hurt his mate, not when he already loved him. He never thought it would be so intense, but the feelings coursing through him were undeniable.

"You just met," Kash argued.

"Look, I think we can discuss this later. We're still outside." Logan pointed to Kash. "I'll ride with you. There's no way in hell I'll sit in a car with mating pheromones."

"Mating?" Kash asked. His eyes shifting from Rhy to Dillan, his face going from confused to understanding to shocked in seconds. "No fucking

way!"

Rhy turned and continued to walk toward his car with his mate in tow. They couldn't stand out there much longer. Rhy's teeth ached to claim his mate, and his tiger paced. With so many other cat shifters near his mate, he felt the need to stake his claim.

"Come on, Goldilocks, we can argue the whole true mate or fated mate thing in the car. Now, where are you parked?" Logan asked.

Rhy was happy Logan knew something about true mates. If it had been anyone else, they would probably have been just as shocked as Kash and Rhy were. Believing and having it happen to him were two different things.

He made it over to his black sedan and opened the passenger door. Dillan smiled at him and got in. They still held hands, and Rhy was reluctant to break contact. He bent over, kissing Dillan's soft hand before untwining their fingers.

Dillan's light brown skin showed a light red tint to it, and Rhy smiled at his mate's blushing face. He gently closed the door before rushing over to the driver side and getting in. As soon as he was in the closed space, he understood why Logan had opted to ride with Kash. The pheromones in the car were high with nowhere to escape. Rhy could feel his incisors lengthening, and he growled. His hands flew to the steering wheel, and he gripped it so hard there was a creaking sound resonating in the car. He stared forward. If he looked at his mate any longer, he wasn't sure if they would make it out of the parking lot before he bit him.

A soft touch caressed his leg. "What's your name?" Dillan asked.

Rhy swallowed, the touch driving him insane, and he blew out a big breath before answering his mate. "Rhy Greggers."

Purring filled the car as Dillan's hand got bolder, and Rhy groaned.

"Buckle up," he said between clenched teeth. He was barely holding back, and with his mate touching him, he was seconds from losing that control.

Dillan's hand moved off Rhy's leg. The loss of touch had Rhy reaching

over and placing his hand on Dillan's leg to make sure he was there. As if his eyes weren't good enough. He needed a connection, something to know it wasn't a crazy dream. His lack of sleep could have created hallucinations, but the warm skin under his hand proved it wasn't some insane daydream, and his mate was, in fact, there.

They gazed into each other's eyes longingly, then Dillan's eyes flickered away, breaking the spell they were both under. He grunted as he tried to get the seatbelt to click into place. Rhy reached over, fixing the tangled seatbelt and buckling it. His face was inches away from his mate's.

The smell that had driven him mad in Mrs. Crawford's house was ten times stronger in person. He looked down at Dillan's plump lips that begged to be kissed. His eyes traveled back up to Dillan's eyes, asking for permission. Rhy wasn't sure he could hold back. Just one kiss would do him over.

At least, he hoped so.

All he saw in Dillan's big blue eyes was acceptance, as if he would let Rhy do anything in that very moment. It was a heady thing to feel the power that his mate was clearly giving him. Rhy closed his eyes, just breathing in his mate's scent before slowly pulling away and sitting back.

He sat there in silence for another second before starting the car and easing out of the parking spot. He spotted Kash and Logan in a truck. The annoyed look on Kash's face clearly showed, whereas Logan looked more worried than anything. He bit his bottom lip.

"Is that your boyfriend?" Dillan asked, his tone harsh.

Rhy was caught off guard but answered quickly. "No, he's a good friend." He turned down the road toward his apartment. "Is the lion more than a friend?"

He hated sounding so unsure of himself, but he cared for his mate and knew he couldn't bear to be away from him. He also knew if there was really something there, he would have to give his mate time before they mated. It

might kill him, but he would never force his mate. No matter how much everything in him drove him to claim his mate right then and there.

He could see Dillan fidgeting in his seat, and Rhy moved his hand from the steering wheel and back onto Dillan's leg. Dillan instantly stopped moving, calming down. Rhy smiled as he drove them back to his place. His grin widened at the thought that it would go from just his place to their place, and if Dillan didn't like the apartment, they could move and get a house with a big yard. And maybe a pet goldfish. The image seemed to relax him a little. The urge to claim was still there, but more like white noise in the background.

He cracked the windows open to let some of the pheromones out. They drove in silence, but it wasn't awkward. It was just peaceful. It settled him and made Rhy feel more complete than anything ever had. He turned into his apartment parking lot. The trip had seemed so short, but nearly half an hour had passed.

Rhy parked and turned to look at Dillan. Dillan had the biggest smile on his face as he stared at Rhy. How could Rhy be so lucky as to get such a beautiful mate?

They stared at each other, Rhy getting lost in the beautiful blue eyes that seemed to have captured the stars. Rhy cupped Dillan's face, and Dillan closed his eyes for only a second, rubbing his cheek against the palm of Rhy's hand. Dillan's soft, ample lips opened, as if he wanted to say something, just as the door to the car swung open.

"Holy smokes, it smells like pure sex in this car!" Kash shouted.

Rhy growled his annoyance at being interrupted. Dillan turned, no longer pressing his face against Rhy's hand.

Kash pointed at Dillan but spoke to Rhy. "You need to explain things to him first before you just try and mate him."

Rhy was confused. There was a knock on his window, and Rhy turned to see Logan standing there, waving for him to lower the window. He pressed

the button, watching the window lower. Logan bit his lip and rubbed the back of his head, as if he had some bad news to tell Rhy. Rhy's hand tightened around Dillan's, not willing to let his mate go. Not just yet. He needed more time.

"Umm... I think... You see... Your mate... I mean, Dillan is... Ummm..." Logan took a deep breath.

Rhy was on the edge of his seat, wondering what Logan could possibly need to tell him. He got it had to do with his mate, who, luckily, still held his hand.

"Why don't we go inside, sit down, and have a talk," Logan suggested.

"You're going to sugarcoat this, aren't you?" Kash asked.

Rhy looked back and forth between them. They knew something, and they weren't telling him. He looked to Dillan, and his face was scrunched with confusion.

"I'm not going to sugarcoat shit. I just think it's best to be inside," Logan countered.

Rhy lifted his eyebrow at Logan, but he just shook his head and headed toward the apartments.

"Come on, Simba," Logan said, gesturing for Kash to follow him.

"Really? The Lion King?" Kash asked. He glanced down at Dillan with a worried look on his face.

Dillan didn't see it, but Rhy did, and he wondered who Kash was to Dillan. Kash left, following behind Logan.

"He's worried," Dillan said.

Rhy nodded. It wasn't a question, but he treated it like one. Dillan grinned at him, moving to get closer to Rhy, but he seemed to have forgotten about the seatbelt that held him back. Rhy watched as Dillan kept trying to move, but the seatbelt held him in place. Dillan glared at the belt across his chest. Rhy smiled and unbuckled him with just a click.

"Oh yeah," Dillan whispered.

Before Rhy could say anything, Dillan had his face close to Rhy's, their lips a hair apart. Rhy could feel Dillan's breath against his lips.

"I've always wanted to do this," Dillan said.

His lips brushed lightly against Rhy's, the soft touch rocking Rhy to his toes. Dillan pulled back a little, and Rhy slid his fingers into Dillan's soft black hair, pushing the hat up until it fell off. Rhy eyed Dillan's ears as they twitched on top of his head. It was cute, but not cute enough to distract him from what he wanted.

He brought Dillan's lips back down to his, pressing their lips firmly together. Rhy's tongue licked the seam of Dillan's lips, and Dillan gasped, opening his mouth. Rhy lightly ran his tongue against Dillan's. He slowly tasted his mate's mouth, and it was an electrifying.

He pulled back, catching his breath. The blue in Dillan's eyes was only a sliver around his blown pupils. Rhy felt pleased with himself. Dillan smiled deeply at him, moving to be closer once more to Rhy. Rhy moved his seat back just in time as Dillan crawled over the console and got into his lap, his face pressed firmly against Rhy's neck.

"We need to go inside. They sounded like they had something important to tell us," Rhy said, but his arms wrapped around Dillan, holding him tightly against his chest.

"It feels like I'm home," Dillan whispered against his neck.

Rhy closed his eyes. "That's because you are home, baby."

They sat there, holding each other for a few seconds, basking in the feel of each other.

Dillan

DILLAN HELD RHY'S HAND THE WHOLE WAY UP TO HIS APARTMENT. THE elevator ride was both amazing and intoxicating. It felt as if his brain was short-circuiting, the smell of Rhy driving him insane. He stood there, but not still. No, that would have been too much to ask. Instead, he pivoted from foot to foot or rubbed his legs together as he got turned on. His stomach felt light but heavy, and it continued to squeeze and flutter as he stayed near Rhy. Not one part of him wanted to back off either.

He was sure if he just moved and put a little space between them, his reaction would cool off, but it felt too good. He clutched Rhy's hand tightly just as the elevator doors opened to the third floor. Rhy led the way to his apartment.

Rhy opened his door, and Dillan was excited to get Rhy to himself. The kiss in the car had only made his need more intense. Dillan had never felt such a burning need before.

"It took you guys long enough," Kash said, coming from around the corner. Unlike Kash's apartment, Rhy's started off with a hallway.

"Oh," Dillan said.

Kash lifted an eyebrow at him. "'Oh' is all you got?"

Dillan felt chastised, as if he may have done something wrong. He hid a little behind Rhy, and Rhy growled a warning at Kash.

Kash side-eyed Rhy. He was smaller than Rhy, but he was acting as if that didn't matter. Dillan wasn't all that sure, but he didn't want Rhy and Kash fighting either, so he stepped up from behind Rhy. Knowing Kash would never hurt him, he walked farther into the place. It smelled so much of Rhy. Dillan had an urge to roll around the whole apartment and rub against everything until their scents combined.

"Are you okay?" Kash asked him.

Dillan smiled, still holding hands with Rhy. To his surprise, Rhy didn't growl or look angrily at Kash. Dillan nodded. He was more than okay. He felt safe and accepted and... something else. A feeling that made his heart beat a little faster and his hands sweat.

"Why don't we go to the living room and have a seat?" Rhy suggested.

"Come on in. I'm already pissed with the lack of coffee in this place," Logan complained.

They turned the corner Kash had come from and entered a makeshift dining area that was connected to the kitchen.

"You drank the last of it," Rhy replied. He continued to lead them past the kitchen and into a spacious living room.

"Who the fuck runs out of coffee?" Logan grumbled. "You buy that stuff in bulk and as soon as you have two cans left, you go buy another bulk order. Simple damn math," he said as he plopped down.

"I'll keep the calculations memorized from now on," Rhy said.

Their banter was easygoing, kind of like Mary-Anne and her friend, Susan. Rhy sat, and Dillan looked to the cushion next to him and then to Rhy's lap. Without a second thought, he jumped into Rhy's lap. Snuggling close to Rhy, he pressed his face firmly against Rhy's neck, inhaling deeply. His scent was addictive, and it was better than catnip and chocolate chip

cookies.

"You do that," Logan remarked. "Come on and sit over here, mama bear."

Kash glared at Logan. "First, I'm not a bear, and second, must they be so close? They only just met."

Dillan stared at Kash as he waved his arms in their direction. Rhy's arms wrapped around Dillan, and he couldn't help but smile. Even without the big man wrapping around him like a vice, he wasn't moving. They would have to get a crowbar to pry him off.

"I think that's inevitable," Logan said. "Now, come over here and pout on this side," he said as he patted the cushion next to him.

Kash stared Dillan in the eyes, and Dillan tried to convey that he was fine. That he was beyond fine. He was happy. He couldn't explain his happiness, but he felt it. Who would question their own happiness? He must have conveyed something reasonable to Kash, because he finally threw his arms in the air and moved to sit with Logan.

"Good. Now that we are all here, let's first talk about the huge shit storm that we are sitting in," Logan retorted.

Dillan stared at the blond man. He was the same size and probably the same age as him. Logan was looking at Rhy. When he opened his mouth to talk, Dillan interrupted.

"How old are you?" Dillan asked.

Logan's face scrunched up in confusion. "What?"

Kash looked at Dillan, then to Logan. "He's probably thinking you two are the same age."

Dillan nodded to confirm.

"Twenty-four," Logan answered.

"You don't know how old you are?" Rhy asked.

"He doesn't know a lot of shit," Logan said.

Dillan didn't like what Logan was implying. He sat up, glaring at Kash, knowing he was the one who would have told Logan anything. He may not

have known how to be a human, but it didn't mean he didn't know anything about them. He'd spent his whole life wishing he could walk on two legs. He'd watched TV, fantasizing about being able to have conversations and meeting new people. He'd watched Sam and Mary-Anne and tried to mimic them the best he could. Even with four paws and a small body.

"What do you mean?" Rhy asked.

"He just learned how to shift the other day, and as you can see, it's not a full shift," Kash said, his hand waving up and down in the direction of Dillan's body.

Dillan tensed. He'd known he was a failure for not being able to shift right, but Kash had said it wasn't a big deal. Yet, he was making a big deal about it.

"What?"

Rhy's confusion hurt more than Dillan thought it would. He was already feeling like a disappointment, but the confusion in Rhy's voice pushed it over the edge.

He started to slide off Rhy's lap and onto the seat next to him. Just before his butt hit the cushion, Rhy's arms tightened around him, stopping him from escaping. Dillan kept his head down, not willing to see the disappointment he knew would be on Rhy's face.

Rhy's hand reached under his chin, tilting it up and turning him to face him. Dillan closed his eyes, refusing to see it. He couldn't fathom disappointing Rhy. Rhy gently guided his face until their foreheads pressed together firmly.

"Please, open your eyes," Rhy begged.

Dillan slowly opened his eyes, looking up into Rhy's big green eyes framed by thick lashes. They were a lighter red than the hair on his head. Up close, Dillan could see just how thick they were, along with all the freckles that peppered his face.

"Thank you," Rhy said as he moved his head and tilted Dillan's slightly to

the side as they kissed.

Dillan's toes curled with the kiss. Oh how he would never get tired of it. Rhy pulled back slowly, and Dillan chased after his lips. He wanted more and wasn't ready for the kiss to end just yet.

"You don't have to hide from me, mate," Rhy whispered.

Dillan smiled, nodding his understanding. There was throat clearing behind them, and Dillan watched as Rhy's face darkened with anger, but his grip never changed, staying gentle as he released Dillan's face. Dillan turned around to look at Kash. The hurt and apologetic look on his face helped take some of the sting of betrayal away.

"You guys are putting off pheromones thicker than Thanksgiving gravy," Logan said, standing and moving to the curtains that Dillan figured either led to a patio or a window.

Logan moved the curtains to the side and opened the door, letting in the cool fresh air. "Fuck, that's better," Logan said. He pressed his face to the door, taking in big lungfuls of air.

Dillan didn't understand Logan's problem. He enjoyed the scent that was filling the room. It made him feel hot all over, but it was pleasing as well.

"Open it a little wider, will you?" Kash said. He sat up straighter, looking at Dillan and then at Rhy. "What I meant earlier was not to dig at you, Dillan. You did an amazing job for your first shift. Plus, the shift at the restaurant. You went between forms so easily. I'm proud of how good you are at it now. I was only trying to point out that you're new to this whole world. You've been living as a cat. You just figured out how to use a spoon—let alone jump into a relationship. I just think it wouldn't be wise."

Dillan tilted his head to the side. He heard and understood everything Kash had said. He was right on some level that Dillan was new to everything, but he wasn't completely oblivious. He may have walked around on four paws, but he had always acted like a human. Rhy's hand tightened on him, holding him firmly in his spot, but Dillan had no wish to move away. He

turned to look at Rhy, but Rhy's focus was on Kash. There was anger written all over his face.

"Are you suggesting that I let my true mate go?" Rhy asked through gritted teeth.

Kash put his hands up in a placating motion, as if to calm a beast. "I'm saying that he needs time to make a decision. Right now, he has no idea what's happening. He doesn't even know about true mates."

Dillan sat up. "I may not know what mate means, but I'm not a child or stupid," Dillan said defensively. He shook his head, trying not to let the frustrated tears fall. "I've spent my life as a cat, but I've spent it with a human brain. I may not have experienced everything you have or had a relationship, but I've watched TV and I've dreamed of the day when I could talk to someone and be with someone. And now that I am, you're saying that I'm a child and too stupid for it all. You aren't even speaking *to me*. You're treating me like I'm still a cat and can't understand you."

Dillan had stood at some point during his rant. His hands clenched at his sides as he argued his point to Kash. To a friend he'd never thought he would have to say any of these things too. The hurt and anger that coursed through him had the tears that he'd tried so hard to hold back streaming down his face.

"Dillan, I'm sorry." Kash was up and moving toward him. A warning growl from Rhy stopped him in his tracks.

Dillan wiped angrily at the tears on his face. "Yeah, I'm sorry that I thought we were friends, but you didn't feel the same. Sorry I couldn't shift good enough for you."

He was working himself up again. His tears choking up his next words. Hands he'd come to know in such a short time pulled him back until he stood with his back to a hard chest. Dillan leaned into the touch, needing the comfort.

"Why don't both of you leave for now," Rhy suggested.

Kash shook his head.

Logan put a hand on Kash's shoulder. "You can crash at my place. For now, leave them."

Kash glanced once more at Dillan, a look of anguish on his face. Dillan felt a little bad that he yelled, but he was angry that Kash thought so little of him. He turned away from Kash, burying his face in Rhy's chest and breathing in his scent helped to calm him down. Dillan heard Kash's footsteps as he left, the door clicking before Dillan dared to turn his head a little to see if Kash had really left. There was an empty spot where Kash had stood only seconds ago.

"You know, he's only worried about you. I may not know you two, but he seemed genuinely concerned about you," Logan said. He walked into Dillan's line of sight. "He may have gone about it the wrong way, but he just doesn't want you to be taken advantage of."

Dillan sighed, feeling like a jerk. A part of him knew everything Logan said was true, but the bigger part hated being ignored and treated as if he knew nothing and was at the forefront of his mind.

"True mates aren't something to jump into lightly," Logan said, then he shrugged. "Take care," he said before walking out of the apartment, the door slamming shut.

Dillan stood there with Rhy holding him. So much swirled around in his mind, but one thing was for certain: everything in him said that Rhy was the one person he could count on. He was meant to be there with Rhy. He pulled back to look Rhy in the eyes. He stared into them, seeing the same feelings reflected back at him, but now there was a small bead of doubt shining through. Dillan could see it, and he could feel it in how Rhy didn't hold him as tightly.

He lowered his head back to Rhy's chest, listening to his heartbeat. He didn't give a damn if the world doubted him. He just needed Rhy not to; it felt wrong.

Dillan's stomach growled, reminding him they hadn't eaten at the restaurant. Rhy laughed, running his big hands in Dillan's hair, his fingers touching one of Dillan's ears. The touch was electrifying, and he moaned from the feeling. Rhy went still, his hand no longer moving, and Dillan felt as if he'd made a mistake.

"Interesting," Rhy said.

He started to move his hand slower, inching closer to Dillan's ear once more, until Dillan's stomach grumbled louder than before, not willing to be ignored.

Rhy laughed. "How about we eat?"

His hand dropped from Dillan's hair, and Dillan nodded, but he was disappointed that Rhy hadn't touched his ear again.

Rhy tipped his chin up and kissed him, licking his bottom lip until Dillan opened his mouth, eager for Rhy to deepen it. He tasted like nothing Dillan had ever experienced, and he much preferred eating Rhy than any food he could possibly offer. Rhy pulled back from the kiss. Dillan was getting tired of him ending kisses before he was ready.

"There you go again with that cute pout," Rhy said.

His thumb rubbed against Dillan's lower lip. Dillan stuck his tongue out to lick his finger, wanting to taste more of Rhy. The loud intake of breath had Dillan looking into Rhy's now black eyes. He was solely focused on Dillan's tongue. Dillan licked the pad of Rhy's thumb once more, getting a deep moan from Rhy. Dillan moaned in return just from hearing Rhy and from his body reacting to Dillan so easily.



RHY WAS HANGING ON BY A THREAD. DILLAN WAS TEMPTING HIM IN ALL THE right ways, and he didn't know how much longer he could hold back from claiming his mate. Dillan's stomach gurgled, announcing that he was starving and reminding Rhy that he needed to be a better mate and feed him. Rhy pulled back, smiling down at Dillan and watching as Dillan once again popped out his bottom lip, making it a cute pout.

"Food first," Rhy said. He reached for Dillan's hand, realizing his mate was still in a jacket. "You can take that off and get comfortable. You can just leave it on the couch."

He turned to head into the kitchen. He couldn't remember if he had any food in his place or when the last time he'd gone grocery shopping was. If he had known he would be meeting his true mate—something more rare than finding a four-leaf clover—then he would have stocked up on every food item in the grocery store.

Rhy walked into the kitchen and opened his cupboards, praying for food to be there, but was still a bit surprised that there were only three cans of chicken noodle soup and a can of string beans. He picked up the can of beans,

not even remembering when he'd bought it, and checked the expiration date. Of course, it was way past the date... by two years. He sighed as he went to toss it.

He froze, everything in him stuck in place at the sight of his mate in his shirt that nearly swallowed his small figure. A black tail swished back and forth in a hypnotic dance. Rhy's eyes traveled up from Dillan's small feet and beautiful bare legs until he got to mid-thigh where Rhy's shirt hid everything else. He continued to stare at his mate.

He looked so tempting—naked except for Rhy's shirt. It did something primal to him to see his mate dressed like that. He inched closer, his eyes transfixed on the show of skin where Dillan's neck connected with his shoulder. With his hair swept to the side, it made for the perfect spot for a mating mark.

Rhy's gums ached and itched, saliva pooling in his mouth at the thought of biting and marking his mate as his. Before he knew it, he had his hands clasped around Dillan's biceps. He bent down, since his mate was easily a head shorter than him, and he pressed his mouth to that smooth piece of skin. Dillan tilted his head, giving Rhy more access. Rhy closed his eyes, a deep and satisfied growl rumbling in his chest.

He just needed a small taste. He ran his tongue over the smooth skin. Moans from both of them had him doing it again and again. Dillan's body trembled in his arms as Rhy continued to lick him.

"Rhy, please," Dillan pleaded.

It broke every restraint Rhy had in him. In seconds, he had his mate lifted up and pressed against the wall as he sucked on the spot he would place his claiming mark. Dillan moaned, his hands trembling on Rhy's shoulders. Rhy pulled back a little to see his mate's face. If he hadn't already been doomed, he had no idea how he would have been able to resist his mate. Dillan's cheeks were flushed with a pink tint, and his eyes were glazed over, nothing but pupil showing, and his mouth was slightly open. Rhy's hands held his

hips, and he could feel how Dillan was trying to thrust against him.

"Please, Rhy," Dillan moaned out.

Rhy looked down and saw that the shirt that had been covering Dillan's lower half had risen up with the movement. Dillan's cock was hard and the leaking precum was holding his attention. His mate needed him.

In the back of his head, he knew he needed to move slowly. They needed to talk, but the way his mate moaned and whimpered had him adjusting so he could free one of his hands. He wrapped it around Dillan's length, the hot flesh pressing against his palm as he stroked. Collecting some precum for lube, he twisted his hand over the head. He looked up just in time to see Dillan's head hit the wall and his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed and moaned out Rhy's name.

His name coming from his mate's mouth had him going back to the spot on Dillan's neck and lightly biting it. Dillan's body shook beneath him as he continued to stroke his cock and bite him gently. Rhy ached to sink his teeth in and give his mate what he knew he wanted. He barely held back.

"Rhy!" Dillan shouted as he came.

Hot cum shot out, covering Rhy's hand. He continued stroking him until small whimpers made him let go. Dillan's eyes closed, his heart beating so loudly Rhy felt it as his own. He panted as he sagged against the wall. He wasn't too heavy for Rhy. He could stay right there and hold his mate forever if Dillan wanted. Dillan blinked his dark, thick lashes, his blue eyes staring back Rhy had a huge smile stretched on his face.

"That." He licked his lips. "Amazing," Dillan rasped out.

Rhy smiled, happy he'd pleased his mate. He wasn't ready to stop touching him, but he still needed to feed Dillan. He started to pull back and let his mate down, but before he could pull them away from the wall, Dillan's slender fingers tightened their grip in his hair. He pulled Rhy's head down, joining their lips together. It caught Rhy off guard, but he quickly caught up and kissed his mate back.

Rhy lowered Dillan until his feet hit the floor while they continued to kiss. Dillan didn't let up until he pulled back for air. He looked like he was about to go in for another kiss until Rhy straightened out of reach of his mate's tantalizing lips. He pouted, and Rhy was tempted to give in and continue kissing.

"Food first and some talking before we continue." Rhy kissed his pouting mate on the forehead before walking back into the kitchen.

The scent of cum on his hand was driving him crazy. He licked his hand. The taste of his mate had him gripping the counter with his other hand, fighting his urge to claim. He closed his eyes, savoring the taste and the moment. He could feel his mate's eyes on him. He shifted his shoulders, feeling as if he'd been caught with his hand in the metaphorical cookie jar. He cleared his throat as he washed his hands before turning to look at his mate.

That was a mistake.

His mate was standing in his kitchen looking like a wet dream. Rhy had to admit the cat ears and tail did something to him. He'd never known he was into things like that.

"I didn't go grocery shopping, and all I have is canned chicken noodle soup," Rhy suggested, grabbing the can from the cupboard.

Dillan's eyes shifted to the can before they were back on Rhy, staring him down. It felt as if his mate could peer into his soul with those gorgeous blue eyes.

"Soup is fine with me," Dillan answered. His eyes traveled around the kitchen, looking everywhere, and Rhy, for the first time, realized how small and empty his kitchen was. He wondered what Dillan thought of it.

"I'll warm it up." Rhy moved to the other side where the stove was. Turning it on and taking out a pot, he grabbed a second can. He wasn't all that hungry, since he'd been fed by the lovely Mrs. Crawford. He froze in the middle of pulling on the tab of the soup can.

His mate had shifted into Mr. Fluffkins, but his name was Dillan. Then again, Kash had said Dillan had spent his whole life as a cat. So many questions went around in his head, he wasn't sure which one he should ask first.

"Dillan, what did Kash mean b—" Rhy turned, but there was no Dillan standing there any longer.

He turned back to the stove and turned it to low. He poured both cans of soup into the pot before going to search for his mate. His apartment wasn't large by any means, so once he'd checked the living room and the small dining area, he went down the hall toward his bedroom.

The door was ajar. Rhy walked into the room, expecting to find his mate looking around and checking out his stuff. Instead, he found Dillan wrapped up in the sheets, his face pressed into Rhy's pillow and his bare ass in the air. Two round brown globes swayed in the air with a black tail a few inches above his beautiful butt.

Rhy stood in the doorway, speechless. He doubted Dillan knew the effect he was having on Rhy at the moment, but how in the hell was he supposed to hold himself back in a situation where no living soul would be able to ignore the temptation?

A moan came from the sheets, and Dillan's hips moved up and down. His dick was hard again and leaking on Rhy's bed, filling the room with such a strong scent, Rhy gripped the doorjamb for dear life.

"Fuck," Rhy growled out. He didn't normally curse, but his mate was making it harder and harder to hold on to his sanity.

Dillan shot up, his face flushed and his eyes glazed over. His hand moved slowly down his body to his leaking cock and wrapped around his length, his eyes never leaving Rhy's as he stroked his himself. He moaned and made needy noises.

Rhy moved before he thought about it. He couldn't fight it even if he wanted to. He was on top of Dillan in seconds, pressing his body against

Dillan's smaller frame, pushing him into the bed.

He grabbed Dillan's hands, moving them up the bed and away from his leaking dick. He couldn't even speak—he was overcome with too many thoughts and emotions. His lips collided with Dillan's plump ones, and he kissed him hard and deep. He kissed down Dillan's neck, then backed up just enough to strip off the shirt Dillan still wore.

His eyes traveled down his mate's naked body—all that glorious brown skin on display. Rhy licked his lips in anticipation of tasting his mate all over. He didn't wait, moving to kiss down Dillan's hairless chest. He took a nipple into his mouth, giving it an open-mouthed kiss as he listened to his mate's unapologetic cries for more.

Pheromones thick in the room, it was nearly blinding how much he wanted his mate. He went to Dillan's other nipple to give it the same lovemaking, and Dillan shouted out his name as his hips tried to thrust up to find friction. Rhy moved a little, securing one of his hands to keep Dillan's hips firmly on the bed. A whimper had Rhy glancing up at his mate's face. The want clearly displayed there let Rhy know what Dillan wanted, but he wanted to explore a little more.

He smirked at his mate, kissing down his stomach. He dipped his tongue into his belly button, getting a surprised gasp from Dillan.

"Rhy," Dillan whined.

A shiver worked through Rhy's body at hearing his mate's need and the way he said his name. "I know, baby," he reassured him.

Rhy continued his open-mouthed kisses down Dillan's body, taking his time on one of Dillan's inner thighs. The moans and cries that filled the room spurred him on, and he continued to nibble and lick the hot flesh. He avoided Dillan's dick, going to his other thigh instead and doing the same assault. He was driving Dillan insane, his mate tossing his head from side to side and gripping the sheets so tightly Rhy was surprised they didn't tear.

"Dillan," Rhy whispered against Dillan's thigh.

He waited for his mate to open his eyes and stare at him. Rhy smiled back him as he hovered over his dick. He licked his lips as he took Dillan into his mouth, watching as Dillan tried to keep looking at him. His mouth opened in an 'O' as he moaned.

Rhy swirled his tongue around Dillan's length before pulling up and going back down, taking even more. He breathed through his nose and relaxed his jaw and throat muscles as he took Dillan's dick all the way in until his lips brushed up against Dillan's skin.

The moans and whimpers coming from Dillan had Rhy moving his own hips. He moaned around the length in his mouth, causing tremors to rack through Dillan's body. He pulled up, swirling his tongue around the head and then pressing against the bundle of nerves he knew would be there.

Dillan shouted his name as a hot spurt of cum hit Rhy in the face. Before the second shot came, Rhy had his mouth wrapped back around the head of Dillan's cock. The next shot landed on his tongue, and he moaned at the taste of Dillan. He sucked lightly until the last drop of cum hit his tongue. He let his mate's spent cock fall from his mouth. He licked his lips as he looked up at Dillan.

A sheen of sweat glistening on his chest, he breathed heavily as he stared at Rhy. "I... I want to try," Dillan said.

Rhy sat up, confused about what Dillan wanted to try. Dillan was fast, slipping from under him and bending his body in angles Rhy wasn't sure was a normal. He pushed Rhy down on the bed before Rhy's brain could catch up to what was happening. Dillan lay on top of him, his tail swishing in the air and a huge grin on his face. He didn't hesitate to kiss Rhy.

Dillan was fiddling with the button on Rhy's jeans, trying to open it then. Rhy pulled back from the kiss. "You don—"

Dillan kissed him, cutting off anything he'd been about to say. There was the sound of a snap and a relieved sigh from Dillan as Rhy's pants opened. Dillan wiggled his hand into Rhy's pants, wrapping his hand around Rhy's

dick.

Rhy groaned from the feeling of his mate's hand on him. He made shallow thrust up into his mate's shallow hold on him. Dillan smirked before he removed his hand. Rhy's eyes opened, and he tried not to let the disappointment show on his face as Dillan moved back.

"Off," Dillan said as he tugged at the pants.

Rhy didn't think—he shoved his pants down as fast as he could. They didn't make it past mid-thigh before Dillan stuck his pink tongue out and was licking his dick like it was ice cream. Rhy groaned from the visual. Precum leaked out, and Rhy was already close, being with his mate was making everything ten times more sensitive. Dillan didn't let the precum slide down, lapping it up the second the bead appearing.

Dillan's eyes closed as he moaned and wrapped his mouth around the head of Rhy's length, sucking and making Rhy's toes curl. Dillan tried to take Rhy's dick deep into his mouth, but his teeth rubbed against Rhy's sensitive length.

"Teeth," Rhy said.

Dillan pulled off, and he looked at Rhy and then back to his cock. Rhy sat up, about to tell Dillan it was okay, but the determined look on his face had Rhy holding back. He wouldn't last much longer, but if his mate wanted to try something, he wasn't going to stop him.

"Can I try again?" Dillan asked.

"You don't have to take the whole thing. Jus—"

"I wasn't trying to take the whole thing. It's huge," Dillan said.

Rhy held back a laugh and shook his head. "Okay, well, just focus on the head. I'm sure I won't last much longer."

Dillan smiled at him before bending over again and taking him back into his mouth. Rhy moaned as Dillan tongued his slit. He used all of his willpower to keep from thrusting as Dillan started licking around the head of his cock.

Rhy watched as Dillan's ears twitched, his fingers itching to touch them. He remembered Dillan's reaction when Rhy had touched them. Rhy moved his hands slowly toward the ears. He caressed them and the reaction was the same—Dillan shot up in surprise, his eyes completely blown.

Rhy smiled at him. "Don't stop now."

Dillan shook his head and went back down, and Rhy's hands once more went to his ears. He rubbed them this time. Dillan didn't stop sucking, but the tremors were visible. He moaned around Rhy's cock, sending vibrations down his length, his balls pulling tight.

He lightly pinched Dillan's ear, earning him a moan. The climax skyrocketed through Rhy at lightning speed, taking him by surprise. He didn't have time to warn Dillan before he was shouting with his release. He fell back against the bed, panting for air.

He'd never come so hard in his life. He swore he saw stars.

Dillan

DILLAN SWALLOWED AND LICKED UP EVERY BIT HE COULD, TRYING TO CHASE the delicious taste of Rhy. He licked his lips, making sure he'd gotten every drop before moving back up to lay on top of Rhy. The bed was big enough for him to lay next to him, but he didn't just want to be near Rhy. He wanted to touch and feel him and listen to his heartbeat. It felt different to want to be a part of someone so strongly, but Dillan wasn't one to fight what he wanted. He rubbed his cheek against Rhy's chest, his fingers connecting the freckles, making patterns where there were none.

A burnt smell filled the air, making Rhy shoot up. Dillan slid down and off his body.

"Soup," he shouted before he was out of the room.

Dillan laughed, watching the giant man run with his pants bunched around his thighs. He nearly fell, wobbling out of the door. Seeing his freckled butt was the best part.

Dillan yawned, tired after their activities. He was hungry, but more than anything, he felt relaxed. He lay back in the bed, wrapping himself in the sheet that smelled of Rhy and now a little like both of them. He pressed his

face back into the pillow he'd been smelling earlier, before Rhy had walked in. The scent of his mate was heedful it was calming just as it was intoxicating, Dillan sighed into the pillow. His eyes closed, his whole body feeling limp. He couldn't fight the sleep that pulled at him.

What felt like seconds later but was probably longer, Rhy woke to sounds of talking further in the apartment. He got up, rubbing his eyes, and got out of the bed. He went to the bedroom door. There, standing at the front door, was Rhy. He was talking to another man. One with an edge to his voice. Dillan stayed in the room, watching them talk until Rhy turned to look at him over his shoulder.

"Good, you're awake," Rhy said.

He turned back around, whispering something to the other man. Rhy turned and headed toward Dillan, and the man walked into the apartment, closing the door behind him. He didn't head toward Dillan; instead, he turned the corner and went to the other part of the apartment.

"Who's that?" Dillan asked.

Rhy smiled at him as he walked back into the room. Dillan went to sit on the bed, looking up at Rhy.

"That's Dezi, my best friend and alpha."

"Oh," Dillan said. He sat there for a moment before something dawned on him, and he stood. "He can help me shift right." His excitement was through the roof.

Rhy kissed him on the forehead. "He's going to try. You're the first person we've ever seen this happen too."

Dillan sighed. Of course, he was the first to mess something up that's supposed to be simple. Rhy's hand went under his chin, tilting his face up.

"Hey, I like your cat ears and tail. There's nothing wrong with you," Rhy said.

Dillan stared into his eyes, trying to see if it was the truth or one of those lies you tell someone so they aren't all mopey, because Dillan was definitely

being mopey. There was no lie there and everything Rhy said rang true. As if to reiterate it, he lightly stroked Dillan's ear, making his legs weak. Rhy bent over, capturing his lips in a delicious kiss.

"I definitely like your reaction. I'm not sure I want him to help you get rid of them," he teased.

Dillan was breathless, and he wasn't sure he wanted them gone either, but he was sure that once he figured out how to shift correctly he could figure out a way to bring them back. Especially if it turned Rhy on.

Rhy stepped back, going over to his drawers. Dillan sat back down, watching Rhy rummage through his belongings. He noticed Rhy had gotten dressed at some point while he'd slept. Dillan sighed with disappointment. He enjoyed watching Rhy's jean-covered butt, but he preferred the freckled one.

"What are you sighing for?" Rhy asked as he pulled out a shirt that looked too small for him.

He handed it over to Dillan, and that made a lot more sense than for Rhy to wear it. Dillan slipped the shirt on easily, but unlike before, the shirt wasn't big on him, so it covered nothing but his torso and chest.

"Pants. I don't know if I have any pants in your size." Rhy stood there, looking at Dillan as if he could make pants magically appear.

"Kash has my pants," Dillan said.

Rhy nodded. "He does, but he is currently at Logan's, which is on the other side of town. Not far, but to call him over just for a pair of pants would be a bit much."

"Okay," Dillan said.

The mention of Kash and how everything had gone down weighed heavily on Dillan. Kash was his first friend, and he had to go and yell at him. He sighed. He needed to apologize and make up with him. He just needed Kash to see him as a person and not a cat or someone who is clueless about everything. Sure, there were things Dillan had never done, but he wasn't

stupid.

"Dillan," Rhy called out. He sat next to Dillan, hand on his knee. Dillan had been so lost in his own thoughts, he hadn't noticed when Rhy had sat.

"Sorry," he whispered.

Rhy smiled at him and brought him in for a hug. Dillan wrapped his arms around Rhy's neck, burying his face in.

"You will get to talk to him again. He seemed stubborn, so I'm sure he will be back around in no time."

Dillan nodded, hoping Rhy was right. He didn't want to lose a friend.

"Now, I found you pants, but we will have to roll and double knot them to stay on you. They're my smallest set of sweatpants."

Dillan pulled back to look at the dark pair of blue sweatpants. He kissed Rhy on the lips. It was one of the things he was growing to like most about being human, besides tasting Rhy and making him moan. He grabbed the sweats, slipping his legs in and pulling them up, only for them to fall in seconds.

They both laughed.

Rhy reached down and pulled the pants back up his legs, and the feel of Rhy's hands grazing against his skin had Dillan hard in second. The smell in the room went from mild to thick as fog. He breathed in gulps of air, and all he could think about was pushing Rhy back down onto the bed and having his way with him again.

A growl was his only warning before Dillan was tossed back onto the bed. Gone were the sweats, and Rhy was on top of him, pressing their lips together.

"We need to go out there," Rhy said, before plunging back into the kiss.

Dillan's whole body ached for Rhy. It was getting stronger the longer they spent time together. When they'd first met, it was a pull, a constant call to his body.

When Rhy first touched him, it was as if his body and everything in him

responded to Rhy. Being surrounded by nothing but the smell of Rhy, it was all too much for him. He couldn't take it anymore. He needed something, but he didn't know what. He just knew Rhy would know.

His mate would know.

Dillan knew the word meant a lot, and Rhy meant everything to him. The feeling overcoming him was insane. He knew deep down they still had so much to learn about each other, but there would be no other for him. Rhy was his mate.

"I need you now," he said.

Rhy's green eyes bore into him as he froze. Dillan stopped moving. He needed Rhy to see he wanted—no, needed him.

"Dillan, a claiming mark is serious."

Dillan nodded and tilted his head to the side. He may not know what a claiming mark was, but he followed his instincts, and his instincts said that he needed Rhy more than anything.

Rhy kissed his neck. "We need to talk ab—"

"Do you also think I am so stupid that I don't know this is an important decision?" Dillan asked, defiantly. He turned to glare at Rhy.

"Of course not, but you don't have all the facts, and I don't want you to regret this," Rhy rushed out.

Dillan took in a deep breath, calming himself. He knew that—just like Kash—Rhy wanted to help Dillan, and he understood, but they were treating him like he was incompetent. He opened his eyes and made sure to stare directly into Rhy's eyes, so he would understand.

"I know this is important. Everything about this feels right. Waiting isn't going to make me question it. I'm not going to sit around wondering why I like the way you feel pressed against me, or why just being near you makes me feel calm. I know it just does. My body and mind react to you. Why should I question this when I know it's meant to be?"

Rhy grabbed his hand, kissing the palm and making his breath hitch. He

kept his eyes focused on Rhy. He hoped he'd convinced him enough, because he didn't think he could handle Rhy pushed it all to the side.

"Thank you," Rhy said.

Dillan didn't know what he was thanking him for, but he was happy Rhy wasn't telling him no or moving away from him. Rhy sat up, stripping his shirt off, and he glanced to the door.

"Give me one second." Rhy kissed him before leaving the room.

Dillan sat there, feeling strangely lonely. He knew Rhy was coming back, but without his warmth, he felt a little cold. How much had his life changed in a matter of a few days? He'd found out he was shifter, and now he'd found someone he's meant to be with, his mate. He smiled as Rhy walked back into the room, closing the door behind him and taking his pants off. Dillan outstretched his arms to Rhy.

Rhy lay back on top of him, taking his mouth in a sweet kiss that had his toes curling and his heart fluttering. Skin-to-skin, Dillan felt all of Rhy. His hands roamed all over Rhy's body, trying to memorize every muscle, every piece of Rhy as they kissed.

Rhy pulled back, a smile on his face. "Turn over," he instructed.

Dillan wanted to be able to look at him. He opened his mouth to argue, but Rhy's kiss stopped him.

"If you turn over, I promise you'll like it," Rhy promised.

Dillan nodded eagerly and turned over. Rhy helped move him until he was on his hands and knee. Dillan glanced over his shoulder to watch Rhy, and he got a wink before Rhy bent over. Before Dillan could ask Rhy what he was doing, a hot wet tongue pressed against his hole. The sensation was strange, but still had Dillan moaning out Rhy's name in surprise. He continued to use his tongue, lapping at Dillan's hole. Dillan couldn't help his cries and pushing his butt back. Pressure against his hole lasted for a second before Rhy's tongue was moving inside of him.

"Rhy," he moaned.

He was unable to get anything out besides his name. All that was running through his head was his mate's name on a continuous loop, his body shaking. Dillan moved his hand down his body, needing to relieve the pressure. He was so close to coming.

"Not yet," Rhy said, before he was back to his tongue assault on Dillan's hole.

Dillan whined as he gripped the sheets. There was pressure again at his hole, but that time it didn't feel like Rhy's tongue. The pressure turned into a slight burn as Rhy pushed farther into him. Dillan opened his mouth to talk, only for a cry to escape instead. Rhy touched something in him that had sparks going off throughout his whole body.

"I've never heard of this happening," Rhy said.

Dillan tried to catch his breath and looked over his shoulder at Rhy. "What?"

Rhy's eyes are transfixed on Dillan's hole. He moved his hand and brushed against the spot again, making Dillan close his eyes as he rode the feeling of ecstasy.

"The more I rub your prostate, the wetter you get. It's like slick," Rhy said, sounding fascinated with whatever was happening with Dillan's body.

There was more pressure, but unlike the first time were there was a little burn, there was none now. Just pressure and then another finger was added. Dillan groaned, rocking his hips back, trying to take more of Rhy's fingers inside of him. He felt them in him, but it was as if it wasn't enough.

"It smells so good," Rhy said, right before he withdrew his fingers and replaced them with his tongue.

Dillan moaned and writhed on the bed, unable to do anything but let his mate have his way with him. He was panting and wanted to come so badly, but Rhy had said to wait. He wasn't sure how much longer he could hold off. Rhy's wiggled his tongue inside of him and growled.

"Rhy, please," Dillan half shouted, half moaned.

Rhy pulled back. Dillan looked back at him and saw his eyes had changed, shifting over into his cat eyes. Dillan stared him in the eyes, caught like prey. He knew Dillan was a predator, and right then and there, Dillan was his target.

Rhy flipped Dillan over and was suddenly kissing him, or more like devouring him. Rhy's hand were under Dillan's hip, lifting him a little, then there was more pressure at Dillan's entrance.

The pressure was there, but Dillan wanted Rhy inside of him. He wanted to feel Rhy. He tried to move his hips to get Rhy to move faster, but the grip Rhy had on him didn't let him budge. A warning growl from Rhy had him going still, and he panted as Rhy slowly entered him. There was no pain, just the overwhelming feeling of being full. Dillan moaned when Rhy grazed against a spot inside Dillan that had sparks going off behind his eye lids. His body felt as if it floated off the bed for a split second. A moan that quickly turned to a whimper as Dillan's need increased.

With Rhy fully in him, the pressure and need for movement had Dillan gripping Rhy's arms so tightly, there would be bruises later.

"Are you okay?" Rhy asked.

Dillan was barely holding it together; his sanity was on the edge of disappearing. "I won't be if you don't move," he hissed.

The smile on Rhy's face lit up his world, but as soon as Rhy moved, Dillan was in ecstasy. His moans and cries filled the room as Rhy continued to thrust into him. Dillan could feel the way Rhy was holding him as if he was the most precious thing. It warmed his heart. Dillan tilted his head to the side, offering his neck once more to Rhy. Saying without words, what they both needed. Rhy's warm lips against his neck as he continued to thrust in and out of him, and Dillan held his breath, waiting for what would happen next. The kisses that Rhy peppered on his skin had him exhaling.

"Mate," was whispered against his skin right before teeth pierced his neck and then pain and pure pleasure rocked him to his core, and he came

shouting. Dillan held onto Rhy for dear life as he shouted and rode through his climax. The warmth spreading inside of him let him know he wasn't alone. Rhy roared against his skin, still latched on with his bite.

Once the last squirt of cum left his body, Dillan had no energy to move or even keep his eyes open. He closed his eyes, breathing heavily. Rhy moved to the side, lying next to him. Dillan wanted to get up and move on top of him, but everything felt like Jell-O and wasn't in any working condition.

Rhy easily picked him up and settled him on Rhy's chest without any words passing.

Dillan sighed, feeling complete in a way he never had before. He felt as if he belonged, and that was the last thing he thought before he fell asleep.



RHY WOKE SLOWLY, SO AS NOT TO WAKE HIS MATE. HE WATCHED DILLAN sleep, still astounded he had a true mate and they had bonded. Rhy was still shocked it had happened so fast. He had heard stories about how it was hard to ignore the mating call, and how it was a strong bond one never wanted to miss out on.

He felt the bond, and he knew Dillan was hungry and slowly waking up without having to check on his breathing and heart rate. The one thing he hadn't heard was how when bonded with your true mate, there was no need for lube. That had been something interesting the night before. Rhy had tasted it, and it had driven him insane. He couldn't get enough of it. He had lost momentary control over his tiger side.

"What time is it?" Dillan asked as he snuggled closer, if it was even possible to get any closer.

Rhy smiled down at his mate. He was definitely a cuddler and not once had he slid off Rhy. He'd kept his balance on top of Rhy the whole night. He was a cat even in his human form.

"It's ten in the morning," Rhy said.

His phone rang, which was on the floor in his pants. He moved Dillan to the side of the bed as he got up to go retrieve it. He answered right before it was sent to voicemail.

"Hey," Rhy greeted.

"You sound better," Dezi's deep voice came across the line.

"Yeah, sorry about yesterday... It's, ummm, a little hard to explain."

Dezi laughed. "Yeah, I could tell by the way you practically shoved me out the door," Dezi teased.

Rhy groaned. He hadn't been his usual self last night. "Sorry about that, Dezi."

There was more laughter. "Just giving you a hard time. Even I could smell the pheromones in the hallway of your apartment. I have no idea how you were even coherent."

Rhy felt the heat creep up his face at the realization his friend knew exactly what had gone on.

"Well, I'm guessing either you two are mated now, or you tied yourself up in the closet," Dezi joked.

Rhy coughed. If Dillan had asked him to wait last night, he might very well have tied himself up in the closet to keep from taking his mate.

"Mated," Rhy said. The word leaving his lips filled him with so much joy he reached out to pull Dillan closer, making sure he was, in fact, real.

"First one of us mated and to a true mate at that..." There was a long pause before Dezi took a deep breath. "How does it feel?"

Rhy closed his eyes. It felt like nothing he had ever experienced before. He could feel Dillan next to him physically, but there was a piece within him that connected him with Dillan. It wasn't something he could put into words, to give Dezi a full explanation. He sighed as he opened his eyes.

"It's a feeling you will never get tired of. One that makes you so connected with that other person there's no denying they are your other half."

There was silence on the other end before Dezi spoke again. "I'm happy

for you, Rhy. I know how much you've always dreamed of meeting your true mate."

Rhy opened his eyes, turning to look at Dillan who'd fallen back to sleep curled around his side. "Yeah."

Dezi cleared his throat. "Well, I'm sure you want to go out to places with your mate, but first we need to help him shift better. You two can come by the house later on."

"That works. Is there some food?" Rhy asked.

"I think I have some ground beef and chicken. I'll start the grill, and I'll invite the others," Dezi said.

Rhy agreed, and he ran his fingers through his mate's hair, admiring the thick black locks. Before Rhy got off the phone, he asked, "How's Kenny?"

There was a huge sigh, explaining it was all not so great.

"He can barely eat or sleep. He went to see Morgan, and I don't think it went well. He's turned off his phone and didn't show up to the office. I've resorted to sending Cole to go stay with him."

Rhy knew what he was going through. It was worse for Kenny, because he knew who his mate was but was denied. Whereas Rhy hadn't known who his mate was or that the reason he couldn't sleep or eat was because he'd smelled his mate.

"Morgan denied him completely?" Rhy asked.

He knew the wolf was skittish and shy, but Morgan didn't seem like the type to shoot someone down.

"Not exactly from what I understand. Kenny went to go see him at the bar yesterday, and the wolf hightailed it out of there."

Rhy groaned. "Well, maybe he was just scared."

Dezi sighed. "Yeah, that's what I'm thinking, but Kenny is taking it pretty hard."

Rhy would too if his mate went the other way when he came around. Looking down at Dillan, he couldn't even fathom it. They had just met, but it

felt as if Rhy had known him his whole life. A few hours mated and Rhy couldn't even imagine a world without Dillan.

"Anyway, we can practice changing. You aren't going to go all crazy if I need to instruct him and get close?" Dezi asked.

"I have no idea," Rhy answered honestly.

Dezi huffed a big breath. "Great, well, don't think just because your mate is there I won't beat you down."

Rhy laughed. "Wouldn't expect anything less, alpha."

Dezi grumbled about just calling him Dezi before hanging up.

Rhy tossed his phone on the nightstand before laying back down. He grabbed Dillan and moved him back on top of him. Dillan didn't wake. He just turned his head and continued to snore softly. Rhy held back his laughter for fear of waking his mate. He lay there, staring up at the ceiling, his fingers running up and down Dillan's soft skin as he slept.



RHY LET Dillan sleep for another hour before he shook his arm to get him to wake up. A sleepy eyed Dillan had Rhy's cock hard and aching to get back into his mate.

"Come on, it's time to wake up. We're going to Dezi's in a bit."

Dillan rubbed his eyes, his tail swishing back and forth. Before Rhy could even prepare, Dillan pounced, wrapping his arms around Rhy's neck and pressing their lips together in a heated kiss. Rhy smiled at his mate's surprise attack. The kiss broke as they both panted for air, and Rhy's eyes traveled down the length of his mate's body, memorizing all his naked flesh. Rhy went in for another kiss, but instead, he kissed air. He opened his eyes, looking for his mate. Dillan stood over by the bathroom door, staring at Rhy with barely held back laughter.

"Shifty little cat," Rhy said.

Dillan winked at him before turning his back at Rhy. The wiggle of his butt had Rhy up and out of bed in seconds. He walked into the bathroom, stopping to admire his mate as Dillan looked at himself in the mirror. He touched his own face as if not used to seeing it. Their eyes met in the mirror, and the grin that took over Dillan's face nearly had Rhy's heart stopping.

"So, who's Dezi?" Dillan asked.

"He's a friend, and he's going to help you with your shift." Rhy moved farther into the bathroom, taking care of business before turning the shower on and turning back to look at Dillan.

He sat on the counter next to the sink, his legs kicking as his eyes focused back on Rhy. "Kash said that only an alpha would be able to help me."

Rhy nodded. "Yeah, that's true, and Dezi is the alpha of our pride. He just happens to be one of my best friends."

Dillan nodded as if he understood, his eyes flicking over to the shower before turning back to Rhy. "I need to apologize, don't I?"

Rhy was going to ask about what, then remembered how things had gone the day before with Dillan's friend Kash. "You were right, but if he is an important friend, apologizing would be the right thing. It didn't seem as if he was saying those things to hurt you, but to protect you."

Dillan's shoulders slumped. "I'm not so good at this friend thing."

Rhy moved forward, gathering Dillan into a hug. "No one is perfect at anything, but I'm sure he's waiting to hear from you and to apologize back."

Dillan wrapped his arms around Rhy's neck as he pulled himself up. He rubbed his face into his neck. "Can I call him?"

Rhy held Dillan. "Of course. Let's shower first, then you can call."

Dillan pulled back with a huge smile on his face, and he peered past Rhy again to the shower. "Are we taking a shower together?"

"Umm, that was the plan, but if you want to tak—"

Dillan let him go and moved past him, getting into the shower before Rhy could even finish.

"Come on," Dillan demanded.

Rhy got into the shower. It wasn't large, but Dillan was small enough that they both fit in there perfectly. Rhy got the soap and lathered up his hands. He smiled at Dillan and began to wash him. He started with his hair, working up a lather. At first, it was just the sound of the water hitting the shower floor, but soon another noise joined.

Rhy wasn't sure he'd heard it right, so he stopped washing Dillan's hair. The noise stopped. Rhy put his hand back into Dillan's hair and began to massage his scalp and the loud noise came back. Dillan moved closer to him until his back was flush to Rhy's front. That's when Rhy knew what the sound was. Dillan was purring. Rhy could feel the vibrations. He'd forgotten Dillan could purr.

"Dillan, are you enjoying this?"

The purring increased as if to answer for Dillan. The vibrations had Rhy's dick hard and leaking. His fingers, which had avoided Dillan's ears at first, now gravitated to them. He touched them lightly, running his fingers up to the tip and back a few times. Dillan's gasp had the purring stopping and replaced with moans.

Rhy rinsed one of his hands free of the shampoo and grabbed the soap, moving his hand down Dillan's wet-slicked skin until he wrapped it around Dillan's firm cock. Rhy stroked him, his moans and cries going straight to Rhy's head like some drug. They both panted as he rubbed his leaking dick against Dillan's crack. Dillan pushed back, rubbing himself against Rhy.

"Rhy," Dillan moaned.

Rhy lost whatever restraint he had. He grabbed Dillan and turned them around so quickly he was surprised they didn't fall. He pressed Dillan firmly against the wall of the shower and kissed him, thrusting his tongue into Dillan's sweet mouth.

Dillan's legs wrapped around his hips just as Rhy lowered him onto his dick. The hot, tight hole wrapped around made him see stars. He put a hand

against the wall to keep from crashing to the ground, his knees weak from the tightness of Dillan's hole. He breathed heavily on Dillan's shoulder, collecting himself as he slowly dragged his length out of Dillan, before plunging it back in. Dillan clutched him, crying out for more.

Like the night before, there was a slick that eased the way into Dillan. Rhy moved the hand not holding Dillan between them to Dillan's hole. He rubbed his fingers against Dillan's entrance where he was stretched around Rhy's dick. He collected some of the slick and brought his fingers to his lips.

Dillan watched him put the fingers in his mouth. He closed his eyes, groaning from the taste of his mate. His hips picked up speed. He moved them until Dillan cried out louder. Rhy continued to thrust into Dillan, pegging his prostate with every thrust. Dillan's head tilted to the side, the mark still red where Rhy had plunged his teeth in the night before.

He didn't feel the burning need to bite down again, but he couldn't ignore the want. He enjoyed the feeling of Dillan tightening around him as he screamed Rhy's name, his teeth deep in his skin and the taste of blood coating his tongue. Rhy licked the area with his mark on it. A shiver worked its way through Dillan and had him tightening around Rhy even more. He almost came from how tight Dillan was squeezing him.

"Mate," Rhy whispered against the mark.

"Please, Rhy, again," Dillan pleaded.

The look in his blue eyes was screaming for more. Rhy wouldn't deny him, couldn't fathom denying his mate. His teeth lengthened as he bit down once again, piercing the flesh of his mate's skin. The rush of his climax came barreling through him, and he growled, coming inside of his mate. His hand moved fast, catching them before they fell to the floor. Rhy's legs shook with the intensity.

Bonding with his mate was mind blowing. He breathed heavily as he licked the wound closed and held his mate. His heart beat a mile a minute as they stood there. The water started to get cold, reminding Rhy they were in

the shower and were supposed to be getting ready to go to Dezi's. His soft dick slid out of Dillan slowly, a wet sound resonating in the bathroom. He lowered Dillan's legs to the floor, his mate still looking dazed and well taken care of. His cheeks were slightly flushed, and his light brown skin practically glowed.

"I could use a nap," Dillan muttered.

Rhy laughed as he reached for the soap and began to lather his mate's skin with the soap.

"Ugh, I don't think I can go again," Dillan said, his hands stopping Rhy's just as he rubbed against Dillan's chest.

"I had no plans to start again. The water is getting cold, and before we go again, you should probably eat something." Rhy continued to wash Dillan's body. He didn't take his time, as much as he wanted to. He focused on getting his mate cleaned before turning and washing himself.

A small hand appeared in front of him.

"Soap," Dillan demanded.

Rhy squirted some soap on Dillan's hand before he went back to lathering himself up. Small, delicate hands touched his back, making him go rigid. The nimble fingers rubbed the soap on his shoulders and back. Rhy had just told Dillan he wouldn't start anything, but Dillan touching him was quickly getting him hard again. He groaned when Dillan's hands started to work the muscles in his neck and shoulders.

"You're tense," Dillan said.

Rhy still held the shower gel. He clutched it so hard the cap opened and squirted the remainder of the gel onto the floor.

"You wasted the soap," Dillan said. His hands going still but staying pressed against Rhy's skin.

Rhy cleared his throat. "We can pick some up later after we leave Dezi's."

"Okay," Dillan said, his hands finally leaving Rhy's back. "Then I guess we better get dressed."

Dillan started to get out of the shower. Before he'd fully left, he turned and winked at Rhy.

Right then and there, Rhy realized Dillan had known exactly what he was doing. He rinsed off the soap in the freezing cold water, though the cold didn't dim the heat he felt for his mate. If anything, it made it stronger.

He turned off the water, getting out of the shower. He stopped at the mirror and grabbed his towel to soak up some of the water. He looked at the mirror. He would need to shave soon, but what was most noticeable was the huge smile he was sporting. He had been happy before, but there was something to say about someone's smile once they'd found love.

Dillan

DILLAN SAT NERVOUSLY IN THE CAR ON THE WAY TO RHY'S FRIEND'S HOUSE, the one that was his alpha. What if even with the help of the alpha he still couldn't shift right? Would Rhy leave him? Just the thought of never seeing Rhy again had his pulse racing, his hands sweating, and his mind going a mile a minute. He didn't want that to happen. He'd just met Rhy, had just gotten him in his life, and for the first time, Dillan felt like he belonged.

"Dillan," Rhy called out.

Dillan looked up, noticing they had stopped. It didn't look like they were at a home. He noticed cars passing them by, since they were on the side of the road. He turned to look at Rhy, his green eyes clearly worried. His big hand cupped Dillan's face, his thumb gently stroking against Dillan's cheek.

"What's the matter?" Rhy asked.

Dillan closed his eyes. The sound of the seatbelt clicking and then Rhy's forehead pressing against Dillan's had him opening his eyes. He gazed into Rhy's.

"Talk to me, babe," Rhy pleaded.

Dillan swallowed, knowing he couldn't ignore the pleading tone. "What if

"I can't shift without a tail and ears?" he whispered.

Dillan closed his eyes, not wanting to see the disappointment in Rhy's eyes he knew would be there. Rhy's firm but gentle lips pressed against his. The kiss deepened, his tongue pressing against the seam of Dillan's lips, asking for entry. Dillan opened his mouth, wanting the kiss. No, that was wrong. He needed the kiss. They kissed for what felt like forever, and Dillan never wanted it to end.

Rhy pulled back from the kiss. "All I want and need is you," Rhy whispered against his lips.

Dillan blinked back the tears that threatened to come as he looked into Rhy's eyes.

"That means with or without ears, I want you, Dillan. However you come." Rhy's hand moved until he lightly pinched Dillan ears, causing a reaction from him. Rhy kissed him again. "Plus, I like the way you react when I touch your ears."

Dillan kissed Rhy again, his heart not racing out of panic anymore, but more from arousal. Rhy smirked as he sat back in his seat and buckled his seatbelt. Turning on the blinker to get back on the road, he offered his hand to Dillan. He smiled as he slid his hand into Rhy's, intertwining their fingers. Dillan looked out the window, watching the world pass him by as he sat there in the car with his mate.

In seconds, they were stopping again, but at a house instead of on the side of the road. Rhy got out of the car and was opening Dillan's door in seconds. Dillan reached down and unbuckled the seatbelt, remembering that he couldn't just get up from the seat. Rhy handed him his hat, and Dillan slipped it on. The houses in the area were distant from each other, but he wore it just in case someone walked around. Even Dillan knew how strange it would look for people to see a man with cat ears and tail. Luckily, most seemed to chalk it up to cosplay or dressing up.

Dillan got out of the car, and they walked to the front door. Rhy opened it

without so much as a knock or ringing the doorbell. They entered the one-story home, and Rhy walked down the hallway, Dillan following behind. The smell of food had his stomach growling and his mouth watering. He hadn't eaten since that morning with Kash, and there had been nothing to eat at Rhy's.

"You two are finally here," a big booming voice shouted.

Dillan covered his ears as they went farther into the home and emerged in the kitchen where the delicious smell was coming from.

"Sorry about that," said a man with dark blonde hair and large muscles.

"It's okay," Dillan said as he licked his lips. His eyes were focused on the plate of steaks that sat on the white countertop.

"You hungry?" the large man asked.

Dillan licked his lips again, making sure he wasn't drooling on the floor. He looked up at Rhy. The big smile on Rhy's face and the slight nod was all the answer Dillan needed to the question he hadn't voiced.

"Yes," Dillan answered.

"Go ahead and fix a plate. I'm making a few more, but you should eat before we start working on your shift." The man placed another steak on the skillet, the sizzling sound making Dillan's stomach growl. "By the way, I'm Dezi."

Dillan stopped and reassessed the man who was the alpha. He did exude power. Dillan wasn't sure what he thought an alpha would be, but Dezi wasn't exactly what he'd pictured. He had a warm smile and a gentle nature about him.

"Thank you. I'm Dillan."

Dezi smiled at him. "Yes, so I've heard."

Rhy moved him over to the table in the kitchen that was large enough to sit ten people. He took Dillan's coat and hat. Dillan watched as Rhy went to fix him a plate, giving him two steaks and a side of some pasta. He set the plate in front of Dillan and kissed his forehead before he walked back out of

the kitchen.

Dillan didn't hesitate. He ate as if his life depended on it, stuffing his mouth full of the delicious food. Ever since he'd had Kash's food, nothing could compare, but the steaks were juicy and full of flavor. He would have to place Dezi's cooking skills under Kash's, who was directly under Mary-Anne's.

The thought of Mary-Anne made him slow down on his eating. He still needed to go back to her, but now he had Rhy. He couldn't possibly become a cat and live with Mary-Anne and forget about Rhy. It just wasn't something he could do. But he didn't want to leave Mary-Anne by herself either. Dillan didn't think Sam had come back all of a sudden while he had been gone. Just the thought of Mary-Anne in the house all by herself had him putting down the last piece of steak.

"What's the matter? You were just inhaling the food, and now you're looking at it as if it bit you," Dezi said, his voice a lot closer than before.

Dillan looked up and saw Dezi standing next to him, prongs in one hand and the plate of steaks in the other.

"Just thinking," Dillan answered.

"Yeah, you were thinking so hard you forgot to finish your food."

Rhy came back into the kitchen, sitting next to Dillan, his hands wrapping around Dillan's. "Is it the same concern you had before?" Rhy asked.

Dillan shook his head. "No," he answered. He sighed. "I don't want to leave you, but what am I supposed to do? There is no way she is okay by herself. And with Sam disappearing, I'm all she has left. She needs me there, but I want to stay with Rhy. I can't imagine my life without you, and I'm not a regular cat and... and..."

Rhy had Dillan up and into his lap in seconds. "Shhh, it's okay," he whispered.

He pressed Dillan's head into his neck, and Dillan closed his eyes and inhaled the calming scent that was Rhy. He realized that tears wet his face,

and he was sobbing. He had no idea when the tears had happened, but he felt like that was all he had been doing lately: being an emotional wreck. He sat there, and no one spoke as Rhy gently ran his fingers through Dillan's hair, holding him as Dillan calmed down.

Dillan sat back a little, wiping his face with the oversized shirt Rhy had given him to wear. He looked at Rhy's smiling face, patiently waiting for Dillan to get himself together.

"What do you mean about Sam disappearing?" Rhy asked.

Dillan shrugged. "One day Sam was there and then all of a sudden he wasn't. Mary-Anne cried for weeks. And then time passed as I tried to make her feel better. The day I got lost, I'd gone out to the garage to check one last time for Sam. I had looked before, but I just knew he was hiding out there. But when I went out there, there was no Sam. I tried to go back into the house but one of the neighbor's dogs saw me and chased me. All I could do was run. When I finally lost him, I realized I'd gotten lost."

Rhy's face pinched, and there was a sad look to it. His rubbing went from soothing to coddling. He hugged Dillan tightly. He stood with Dillan in his arms and left the kitchen. They went down the hall until they entered a room with a single bed and blue-colored walls. Rhy still held onto him even as he crawled onto the bed. With his back against the headboard, Rhy finally looked down at Dillan.

"Babe, I need to tell you something, but before I do, I want you to know that I'm here for you. No matter what you decide."

Dillan nodded, knowing that Rhy would be there for him. Their bond ran so deeply that it was rooted inside of him.

"Sam passed away two years ago. He didn't leave."

Dillan heard the words, but it was as if he didn't fully understand. Rhy's lips began to move again, but Dillan heard none of it, still trying to comprehend what he had just been told. On some level, he'd known it to be true, but it couldn't be the case. Sam was so strong and always active. He had

to still be alive. His mind turned over the turmoil as he sat there with Rhy. He couldn't cry, and that scared him.

He just sat there frozen, not hearing anything. There, but not. He tried to think back to around the time Sam had stop being there, and there had been signs. Mary-Anne crying over a picture of him. Or when a few of Mary-Anne's friends came by with food. Or the day Mary-Anne came home wearing all black. There had been signs, plenty of them, but Dillan hadn't picked up on any of them.

Rhy's hands on both of his cheeks and their foreheads pressed together finally had Dillan blinking. His vision blurred with the tears that had spilled over as he finally let the realization hit him. He'd known but never let the thought linger.

"Shh, it's okay." Rhy held him as he cried.

He sat there for awhile in Rhy's arms, and at some point, he stopped crying. he pulled back and looked into Rhy's eyes. "I'm okay."

"You sure? We can sit here as long as you need."

Dillan grinned. He was so lucky to have Rhy there with him. "Yeah, I know. Thank you." He pressed his face into Rhy's chest. "I kind of knew on some level. I just never acknowledged it. I won't lie and say it doesn't hurt, but I think at some point I made peace with Sam being gone. Going out to look for him was my own selfish, last minute effort to keep pretending." Dillan looked down at his hands as he sat there.

Lips pressed against his forehead. "We can go home if you need," Rhy said.

Dillan liked that he referred to his own apartment as *their* home. He took in a deep breath and shook his head. "No, I need to learn how to shift properly." He looked at Rhy to convey the importance.

Rhy said he would accept him either way, but Dillan wanted to do it just so he knew he could. It was for his own benefit. Rhy nodded and kissed him one more time, stealing his breath away, before they got out of the bed and

went back to the kitchen.

Dezi sat at the table finishing his steak, and he smiled at them as they walked in. He had a warm smile, brightening his face. He had dark blue eyes and short dirty blond hair.

"Everything alright?"

"Yeah," Rhy said.

Dillan sat, and Dezi passed him his plate with his half-eaten steak still on it. Dillan wasn't starving anymore, but he wasn't going to waste the food either. He ate the steak as Rhy and Dezi talked about some work stuff. Dillan half paid attention, but really, he focused on eating and thinking about how he was going to shift.

"Dillan," Rhy called out his name while waving a hand in his face.

Dillan snapped out of his own thoughts, and he smiled at his worried-looking mate. "Sorry, I was daydreaming."

Dezi stood from the table. "You ready to try shifting?"

Dillan nodded. He stood and looked around. "Are we shifting in here?"

Dezi shook his head. "No, we can go out back. Neighbors are far enough they won't see. Plus, the back is nothing but woods." He opened the door to lead them outside.

Dillan took in a deep breath. Rhy's hand at his back gave him the boost he needed as he followed Dezi outside. There was a small clearing, but mostly dense woods.

"Alright, when you first shifted, how old were you?" Dezi asked.

Dillan shrugged. "I'm not sure."

Dezi nodded as if he understood and heard that answer a lot. "When shifting, what emotion consumes you the most?"

Dillan hadn't thought about it. He wanted to say "I don't know," but he felt the need to answer at least one of Dezi's questions. He stood there, thinking, but nothing came to mind. He couldn't say happy or sad or angry or really any emotion. He had been frustrated with his first shift with Kash, but

that was from a lack of being able to actually do it. It didn't feel like it had anything to do with the change.

"I don't know," Dillan confessed, lowering his head.

"That's okay. We're going to try something. Have you ever meditated before?" Dezi asked.

Dillan shook his head. Dezi sat and patted the ground for Dillan to sit as well.

"We're going to try and connect with your feline side. Since you're mated to Rhy, I should be able to connect with you." He outstretched his hands.

Dillan looked back at Rhy before putting his hands in Dezi's.

"Concentrate on the feeling of shifting. Don't let it take you over, just let it sit there and try and remember your first time shifting," Dezi said.

Dillan tried, but there was nothing there but blackness. He breathed and continued to try, hoping to remember something. Cold dread seeped into his veins and clutched at his heart. Fear like no other and the smell of blood penetrated him to his core. He could hear cries and pleading in a woman's voice. He didn't want to think about this, the nightmare that plagued him sometimes. He shook his head, wanting to leave it. He didn't want to be there; he wanted Rhy. He tried to call out, but to no avail. He was stuck.

Hands wrapped around him, and he fought back, struggling to get free, until the scent of blood was replaced with the calming scent of Rhy. Dillan went still, breathing in the scent. The fear and screams receded, and all that was left was Rhy. Standing there with his lean build, red hair, and deep green eyes, he smiled at Dillan. Dillan's heart rate slowed, his breaths no longer labored as he focused on his mate. He felt the bond they shared and the safety he had within it.

Dillan opened his eyes. He was in Rhy's arms, face pressed against his neck.

"Are you okay?" Rhy asked.

Dillan sighed with relief. "Yes."

Rhy held him a moment longer before Dillan pulled back and turned to Dezi.

Dezi still sat on the ground, studying him. "Would you like to keep going?"

Dillan felt Rhy tense, but he didn't answer for him. Dillan didn't want to go through that again, but he didn't want to give up either.

"Yes, please." Dillan got off Rhy's lap and sat on the ground once again. He took in a deep breath and looked at Dezi.

"Let's try a different approach."

Dillan nodded, more than happy.

"Now close your eyes and try to think about your feline side," Dezi instructed.

Dillan closed his eyes. There was nothing, and for a while, he wasn't sure where to begin. He was the cat, but how the others spoke about their shifts... It was like the animal was another part of them. Dillan sighed, trying to figure it out.

"No pressure. Take your time. Why not try to start off with yourself as your feline," Dezi suggested.

Dillan rolled his shoulders and tried again, but this time, instead of trying to figure out what the cat looked like, he imagined seeing himself in the mirror as a cat. His black fur and white whiskers and his blue cat eyes looking back at him.

"Good, now imagine your human self standing next to your cat," Dezi said, his voice resonating inside of Dillan's head.

Dillan stared at the makeshift mirror and pictured his human self standing next to him. His light brown skin and slightly curly black hair and slim body. It took a while, but like a mirage, his human self appeared there without the cat ears and tail.

"As shifters, we are two beings in one," Dezi said.

Dillan saw that now. He had always thought he was just a cat, but when

he tried shifting to be a human, he still felt as if he was a cat.

"Now that you see the difference, you need to feel the difference as well. You can open your eyes," Dezi instructed.

Dillan did, no longer seeing himself in the mirror.

"I'm going to use my bond with Rhy to force a shift on you. You will hear my voice telling you to shift, and it will happen. From there, you will shift back into your human form, but remember, you must think of them as separate."

Dillan nodded. He understood. He waited for Dezi to speak, not sure what it would feel like.

"Shift," said a big booming voice that didn't sound like Dezi resonated through Dillan.

It felt as if his body was shaking from the inside out. Before he knew it, he was in his cat form, his paws touching the cool grass. He looked at Rhy and Dezi, standing over him. They just stood there, waiting for Dillan, but when he tried to shift, it was like the first time all over again.



RHY WATCHED DILLAN IN HIS CAT FORM. "HE'S STRUGGLING."

His friend and alpha sighed. "Yes, but you have to let him shift on his own if this is going to work, or he may have to start all over again. His body may have reverted to not knowing how to shift."

Rhy watched as Dillan continued to stand there in his cat form. He believed in his mate.

"The other way wasn't feasible. Whatever traumatizing thing happened to him was blocking that route. This was the only way," Dezi said.

Rhy nodded. He'd felt the terror, and it had felt like his own. He'd reached out for his mate instantly. He wanted to ask Dillan what had happened to him, but he got the feeling Dillan didn't really remember.

The back door opened and closed. Rhy turned around to see Logan walking toward them.

"What's going on?" Logan asked.

"Dillan is trying to shift," Rhy informed him.

Logan came over to them and looked down at the struggling Dillan. They were all silent as they waited. A few minutes passed and nothing happened.

Just as Rhy got ready to say something, the shift started to happen. It was slow; his body lengthened into its human shape and fur receded. Soon, Dillan was on hands and knees, panting for breath as he shook slightly from the exertion of the shift.

Rhy smiled, noticing the lack of tail or ears. He would miss them, but he was happy Dillan was able to shift properly. Rhy knelt to gather his mate in his arms. A towel appeared in front of his face, and he used it to drape over Dillan before lifting him and taking him into the house.

Rhy sat with Dillan in his arms. He rubbed Dillan's arms, trying to warm him. His teeth chattered, and he snuggled closer to Rhy. Dezi walked into the living room and turned the fireplace on. Logan wasn't far behind, and he put Dillan's clothes on the floor next to them before going to sit on the couch. Logan made eye contact with Rhy for a second before he turned to talk to Dezi. Rhy wondered what had happened, but Dillan still shivering pulled his attention away.

Dillan's shudders slowed, but they stayed like that for a while. Dezi and Logan left the living room, giving them privacy. Rhy looked down at his mate, and there was a huge smile on Dillan's face as his hands wandered up to his head. He ran his fingers through his hair.

"No ears," he whispered.

Rhy smiled. "No tail either."

Dillan smiled at him, and Rhy kissed his mate's sweet lips before pulling back. Dillan got up, and Rhy handed him his clothes.

"Are there any steaks left?" Cole's loud voice echoed throughout the house.

"Who's that?" Dillan asked.

"Cole. He's loud. Get dressed so we can join the others." The clothes were too big, and they would need to go shopping soon.

Dillan dressed quickly, and they headed to the kitchen. Cole sat at the table, devouring his steak, and Logan was at the coffee machine, making a

cup.

"Oh, hey," Cole said around a mouthful of food.

"Umm, hi," Dillan said.

Cole swallowed his food. "So you're the mate. Dillan, right?"

Dillan nodded.

"Well, I'm Cole." Cole stuck out his hand.

Dillan went over and greeted him before turning to Logan. "Where's Kash?" Dillan asked.

"Job interview at a place that called at the last minute." Logan took a sip of his coffee and groaned.

"What's that?" Dillan asked.

Logan gasped as if Dillan had asked what was the meaning of life.

"This right here is the elixir of life. Without it, there is no meaning."

Dillan walked over to Logan. "What is it called?" Awe filled his voice.

"Coffee," Logan said. "Here, have some." He poured Dillan some, handing him the cup.

Rhy had a bad feeling about it, but when Dillan took a sip, he coughed and handed the cup back. "That is the worst thing I've ever had. It has to be poison."

Logan shook his head as he took the cup of coffee. "I will not tolerate such hateful speech about coffee. And here I thought we were friends."

"We are, but that is gross," Dillan said, pointing to the coffee.

Logan glared at him before sighing. "You are a newbie. It was my mistake. You need flavored creamer." Logan turned to Dezi who was back at the oven making more steak. "Do you still have the creamer I left here?"

Dezi nodded, pointing to the fridge. Logan got it out and poured enough so there was more cream than coffee in the cup and handed it to Dillan. Rhy watched as Dillan looked at him nervously before taking another sip. His face scrunched up before it smoothed out and smile spread across his face.

"That's good," he said, drinking more of the caffeinated drink.

"That's better. Our friendship is repaired." Logan went to sit down, and Dillan sat next to Rhy. "Oh, here. I got a phone for Dillan."

He passed it over, and Dillan put down his coffee cup, which had gone from full to half empty. He turned the phone over, a smile lighting up his face as he opened it and began to play on it.

"There are numbers already programmed in it," Dillan pointed out.

Logan nodded. "Everyone in the pride is programmed in there, just in case you can't reach Rhy or you want to talk to anyone but Rhy. We're all in there."

Cole laughed at the last bit, nearly choking on his food. Rhy shook his head at his friends. The feeling of family and completeness had Rhy relaxing and enjoying himself.

"Thank you," Dillan said, staring at the phone.

Logan nodded. "Oh, I also gave Kash a phone."

Dillan looked up, shock and happiness blended together on his face. "Do you think he might be done with his interview?"

Logan shrugged. "If he's not, you can always leave a voicemail."

Dillan looked at Rhy, his eyes pleading and unsure of what he should do.

Rhy smiled and kissed his mate on the forehead. "Why don't you go give him a call? You can go to the guest room to make your call in private."

Dillan kissed him before getting up and walking down the hall to the room.

"You're wrapped around his finger," Cole said.

Rhy couldn't deny that. He turned to his friend. "Once you get your true mate, I guarantee you will be too."

Cole shook his head. "No, that's okay. I like my balls free just the way they are."

Rhy shook his head.



THEY LEFT Dezi's and headed to the mall. Well, their little town's mall couldn't really be considered a mall. It was three stores and a rinky-dink food court. He pulled into the parking lot and looked over at a jittery Dillan who was still talking. Rhy had stopped trying to keep track of what he was saying three minutes into the drive. The caffeine had kicked in right before they'd left, and Rhy was cursing Logan for giving his mate coffee.

"Let's go pick out some clothes for you," Rhy said.

Dillan stopped talking as he turned and looked at where they were, as if he'd gotten lost in whatever he had been talking about.

"Where are we?" Dillan asked.

Rhy laughed. He'd told him before they'd gotten in the car. "The store. Come on."

Dillan waited for Rhy to open his door and then got out. He looked around the practically empty parking lot. "But I like wearing your clothes."

Rhy groaned. He enjoyed seeing his mate in his clothes. It filled a possessive part of him, but he still felt like Dillan needed his own things.

"We can get you a few things. You can still wear my clothes, but at least you'll have options."

Dillan nodded, and Rhy linked their hands as they went into the small mall. There were a lot more people than the parking lot had cars. People went about each store, and teens walked around talking on their phone.

"I didn't even know the town had this many people," Dillan said as he moved a little closer to Rhy.

Rhy nodded. He hadn't either. They walked to the first store—a chain store that sold clothes for everyone, along with jewelry and makeup and the miscellaneous area where there was kitchen stuff and kids' toys. But mostly they sold clothes. Rhy went straight for the men's section, and they looked around the area.

"Pick out anything you like," Rhy said.

Dillan smiled at him and went to go look at some shirts. Rhy picked out a

few pair of jeans in the size he thought Dillan was and a few sweaters. He turned to find Dillan with a pile of shirts and pants in his arms. Rhy smiled, happy that his mate was enjoying himself.

"Let's go try these on before we take them home."

He grabbed the pile out of Dillan's hands as they went toward a changing room. There was a six clothes item rule, so Dillan had to choose what he wanted to try on. Rhy waited for Dillan to appear with an outfit on.

Everything looked good on his mate. But everything he put on paled in comparison to his beautiful smile.

"What about this one?" Dillan came bouncing out of the dressing room with outfit number twenty or twenty-five. Rhy had lost count.

"It looks good on you," Rhy said. He wasn't lying—it did look good—but he could tell by the way Dillan frowned at him it wasn't the answer he'd been looking for.

"One more and then we can be done. I never knew shopping could be so much fun." Dillan rushed off.

Rhy smiled as he waited for his mate. Dillan came out, showcasing a nice outfit: skin-tight jeans that left nothing to the imagination and a green shirt.

"I like the jeans," Rhy practically growled.

Dillan smiled, and he turned around. "Oh, a penny," he said as he bent over and gave Rhy a view.

Rhy was all for buying the jeans just so he could strip them off his mate. Rhy growled as Dillan wiggled his jean-clad butt at him.

"Got get changed. We're going home," he demanded.

Dillan stood and looked at Rhy, batting his eyelashes with as much innocence as he could muster. "If that's what you want." Dillan sashayed back into the changing room.

It didn't slip past Rhy's notice that there was no penny, and his mate was teasing him. Rhy had to adjust himself discreetly before Dillan came back out.

"All ready," he said.

Dillan picked out the items he wanted to keep, which was half the pile. He made sure to put the jeans that fit him like a second skin at the top of the pile. They checked out in record time, and Rhy might have pushed a few people out of his way in the race to get his mate back to the car so they could get home.

"Someone is in a rush," Dillan said.

Rhy glanced at him before starting the car and driving home. Dillan was still a little jittery, but at least he wasn't talking fast. He watched the scenery as Rhy raced them home. They got there, and Rhy got Dillan out of the car and grabbed the bags from the backseat. They got on the elevator, and Dillan said nothing, but his hands twisted and his foot tapped. Rhy was silent as he watched the numbers tick by on the way up to their floor.

Finally, the elevator doors opened. Rhy waited for Dillan to go first as they made their way to the door. He passed the key to Dillan, remembering he needed to get Dillan a set made. They entered the apartment, and Rhy dropped the bags.

Just as Dillan opened his mouth to speak, Rhy attacked. He swung Dillan around and pinned him against the front door, consuming him with a kiss.

"You're a tease," Rhy said between kisses as his lips traveled down Dillan's neck.

A moan left Dillan's lips. Rhy picked him up and moved them to the bedroom, going back to kissing Dillan.



FOR TWO DAYS, Rhy lived the mated dream. They only left the bed a few times to get food. Rhy made them small meals to tide them over, but it was as if he couldn't keep his hands off his mate.

A knock at the door startled him. He went to it only to be greeted by a sad

looking Logan.

Logan came in, his shoulders slumped and a slight frown on his face. "Where's Dillan?" Logan asked.

Dillan came down the hall with a pair of sweatpants on and one of Rhy's t-shirts. Although his clothes now filled half of the closet, he still picked up Rhy's shirts and put them on most of the time.

"Hey, Logan, what's the matter?"

Logan sighed and ran his fingers through his bleach blond hair. "We should probably go sit down."

Dillan looked back at Rhy, but he was confused too. They all moved toward the living room, Logan taking the couch opposite of Rhy and Dillan. Dillan pressed himself against Rhy as they sat there, waiting for Logan to talk.

"I went to check up on Mrs. Crawford," Logan started.

Dillan went still as a statue. "How's Mary-Anne? Did she ask about me?"

Logan glanced at Rhy, the look in his eyes pleading for help. Rhy put his hands on Dillan, pulling him back against him. He had a feeling the next thing that came out of Logan's mouth wasn't going to be she was happy and baking cookies.

Logan took a deep breath. "Apparently, she's been living with cancer for the past six months, and it has escalated as of late. She is currently in the hospital."

"How long does she have?" Rhy asked.

Dillan had stiffened at the news.

Logan shook his head. "I visited, and she was awake and a little lucid, but the doctor said any day." He laughed. "She lied and told the nurse I was her grandson." A tear rolled down his face. "You should go visit. Both of you."

"Dillan." Rhy shook him slightly.

"We have to go now," he whispered, unshed tears in his eyes as he looked up at Rhy.

Rhy nodded. "Then we go."

Dillan

DILLAN SAT IN THE UNCOMFORTABLE HOSPITAL CHAIR, HIS BACK ARCHED AND his neck feeling as if it was at a weird angle. He'd been there for the past couple of hours, watching Mary-Anne sleep. He moved closer to her, adjusting his hand under her's. Her hand had never felt frail and cold his whole life. Tears burned at the back of his eyes as he looked at the woman who had raised and cared for him. She may not have known she had a shifter in her house, but she'd shown Dillan love and compassion as if he was her child.

He couldn't fight the tears. It felt as if he had been crying all the time. He pressed his forehead to her hand as hot tears streamed down his face. There was a slight squeeze to his hand. Dillan's head shot up as he turned to stare at Mary-Anne. She looked so tired. Wrinkles that had never been there before covered her face, her once glowing skin ashen and pale.

"Who are you?" she asked.

Dillan wanted to scream at her that it was him, Mr. Fluffkins, but he knew how that would sound. He smiled up at her and lightly squeezed her hand. "I'm Dillan, just a stranger," he said.

Mary-Anne stared at him for a long time. A spark in her eyes showing her old self appeared before it twinkled out. She rested her head back against the pillow, but she hadn't let go of Dillan's hand. She clutched it tighter.

"Dillan is a beautiful name," she finally said.

"Thank you."

She smiled, closing her eyes. Dillan thought she was going back to sleep when she spoke again, surprising him.

"It's the name Sam and I picked out. It was going to be our first child's name. Boy or girl, Dillan was going to be their first name. Sam and I couldn't agree on the middle name, but the first was a given. We both fell in love with the name the moment we heard it."

Dillan barely held back the fresh tears that threatened to spill.

Mary-Anne's hand squeezed his. "You seem like a nice boy, and so handsome too. The name Dillan fits you."

Dillan smiled at her. "Thank you, ma'am."

She nodded. "We never had any kids, found out I couldn't have any. I was so afraid to go home and tell Sam that I couldn't give him any kids. He was always talking about going hunting, reading, building stuff all with a kid by his side. He didn't know he married someone infertile, and it killed me that I couldn't give him what he wanted most."

Dillan listened to her story, and she took a deep breath. He could hear her voice wavering with emotion when she talked about Sam.

"Well, I got home from the doctor, and I was prepared to tell Sam. I'd had a long talk with myself in the car. As soon as I saw him, I couldn't hold it together; I cried and cried. I just knew he was going to leave me and have nothing to do with me. It would make his life easier. Instead, that stubborn fool told me he had everything he wanted. He didn't need or want anything but me. Had me crying even more, just a sobbing mess."

Dillan laughed. "He sounds like a wonderful man."

A single tear ran down Mary-Anne's face. "He was. That he was." She

took in a shaky breath. "I couldn't get over it. I felt as if I'd let him down by not being able to give him a baby. You know what he did?"

Dillan shook his head.

She smiled, as if remembering brought her joy. "He brought home a black fur ball. It was fluffy and downright adorable. He said the cat needed parents and that we had room in our hearts to raise it. Well, I got the honor of naming it, but in all honesty, I think Sam hated the name I chose for the cat, but he never argued with me. Called him Mr. Fluffkins." She laughed. "I'm not so good at names, just knew the cat was fluffy and went with it."

Dillan laughed. He wasn't hating his name so much anymore.

"This cat was like our own child. I know a lot of people say that and don't mean it, but I mean it. Sam did everything with him that he had planned for the future kids we never had. He read to Mr. Fluffkins, took him to the garage to be around him when he worked on stuff. He even took him camping once. I never said anything, because Sam was happy, but sometimes, when he didn't know I was around, I'd listen to how he talked to the cat and call him Dillan." Fresh tears streamed down her face as she continued to talk. "I just want to see Dillan one more time. I want to make sure he goes to a good home." Her hand shook as she cried more.

Dillan squeezed her hand gently, his own tears hot against his face. To know that his name meant so much to her...

"I know you're just some stranger, but I appreciate you listening to my story," she said.

Dillan stayed there until she fell back asleep, and even then, he held her hand for a little while longer. A nurse came into the room eventually to let him know that visiting hours were up. Dillan nodded, reluctantly unwound their fingers, and walked out of the room. Outside, the cold, crisp air couldn't penetrate his numbed feelings.

"Dillan."

Rhy's gentle, warm voice filled him, and he turned to see his mate

standing outside. His nose and cheeks red, he was standing near the entrance to the hospital. His arms opened, and Dillan didn't hesitate to jump into his arms. He wound his arms around Rhy's neck and squeezed as more tears streamed down his face. Rhy said nothing as he stood there and held Dillan. No matter how cold it was or that it even started to snow, he held Dillan through it all.

Dillan finally felt the cold and pulled back. He looked into his mate's eyes and smiled up at him. He loved him more than words could ever describe. "Can we go home?" Dillan asked.

Rhy nodded, grabbing his hand as they walked to the car. He opened the door for Dillan. Dillan got in the car and buckled himself in. He watched as Rhy ran around the car and got into the driver seat. Rhy buckled up and started the car. They headed home in silence. Dillan stared up at the full moon. It held him with its beauty; he lost himself in looking.

"Dillan," Rhy called out.

Dillan blinked, breaking the moon's spell on him only to notice that they'd made it home. He turned to Rhy. It must have been the way he looked at Rhy, because he was out of the car and opening Dillan's door in seconds. Dillan got out, and Rhy scooped him up.

Dillan laid his head on his mate's shoulder as Rhy walked them inside. Something had to be said about how strong Rhy was... or how light Dillan was. Either way, he was thankful that his mate was capable of carrying him. He sighed as they entered the apartment building and the door closed, blocking the cold wind from getting in. They got onto the elevator, and Dillan lifted his head and looked Rhy in the eyes.

"I love you, Rhy," Dillan confessed.

Rhy blinked, as if surprised, before he turned them around and Dillan was firmly pinned against the wall of the elevator, with his mate flush against his front. His lips touched against his own. Their tongues intertwined, an intoxicating feeling overwhelming him. The sound of the elevator doors

opening had them breaking apart. Rhy didn't move to get off the elevator, pressing his forehead against Dillan's. Their breath mingled as they both panted from the heated kiss.

"I love you too," Rhy said.

Tears that Dillan didn't know he had left spilled down his face. He knew that Rhy loved him; he'd felt it through the bond they had. He'd known from the way Rhy touched him and was so gentle with him, but it was different hearing it. They kissed once more before Rhy broke away to lean back and press the button for their floor. Luckily, the elevator hadn't moved and opened immediately.

Dillan was carried off the elevator and taken into their apartment. Rhy took him straight to the bedroom, and once there, he gently lowered Dillan to the bed.

Dillan went to sit up, but Rhy's hand on his chest kept him on his back. Rhy smiled down at him and lowered himself on top, kissing Dillan once more. It was slow and passionate, their lips only parting for a brief second as Rhy lifted Dillan's shirt off. Once the shirt cleared Dillan's head, their lips touched again. Dillan sighed into the kiss, as if he was starved for it.

Rhy's hands touched him everywhere all at once. Dillan lost himself in the feel and touch of Rhy. He couldn't think of anything except being skin to skin with his mate.

Dillan's fingers pulled at the t-shirt that Rhy still wore, tugging at it, wanting the barrier gone. Rhy smiled against his lips before stepping back and taking his clothes off. Dillan watched as Rhy got undressed, his hungry green eyes never leaving Dillan. He felt pinned to the bed by his mate's gaze.

Rhy moved back on top of him, all rippling muscles and stealth draped over Dillan. Dillan's hands touched the hot flesh of his mate, marveling at the hard lines and beautiful freckles that decorated his skin. Rhy's lips landed on his once more, as if they hadn't parted even for a second. Rhy's hands moved over Dillan's body, touching him slowly, going to the places were Dillan

ached the most. His hole twitched with anticipation.

Rhy's fingers touched his hole, rubbing his fingers against the fluttering pucker, causing Dillan to break the kiss to moan out for more. He tried to move his hips in order to get Rhy inside of him, only for his mate to move his fingers back. Dillan opened his eyes in anger.

"We're going slowly," Rhy said before kissing him again and placing his finger against Dillan's entrance with little to no pressure.

It drove Dillan mad; he wanted to feel Rhy inside of him, claiming him once more.

"Your whimpers are making it hard to move slowly," Rhy said against Dillan's throat.

"Why must we move slowly?" Dillan questioned.

Hot, wet kisses pressed against his mating mark and had Dillan's toes curling, his hole clenching around the fingers that finally entered him. He cried out in relief as much as anguish. He wanted so much more; he wanted Rhy.

"I'm right here, baby," Rhy said, taking his mouth in another heated kiss.

Dillan hadn't realized that he'd even said anything, too delusional with want and need. Rhy thrust his tongue into Dillan's mouth to the same rhythm his fingers thrust into his hole. Dillan didn't know where to focus; he could only lay there, enjoying every little bit Rhy gave him. Rhy pressed against his prostate, and Dillan saw stars as he cried out. His whole body was riddled with shocks as Rhy moved and lined himself up with Dillan's entrance. Dillan watched with bated breath as Rhy slid into him.

Rhy moved inch by inch so slow Dillan almost shouted for him to move faster. Once Rhy was fully inside of him, Dillan's body was shaking. He moved his hips to get Rhy moving, but his mate stopped his movements before they even began.

"Slow," Rhy whispered, taking Dillan's mouth in a sensual kiss, keeping him from arguing.

Dillan lost himself in the kiss and the gentle way Rhy moved in and out of him. Rhy's arms wrapped around him. Dillan cried out from the slow way Rhy moved and held him. Rhy licked his mating mark, creating slow waves through Dillan. The snail like pace was driving him insane, and he no longer knew where he began and Rhy ended. He could only feel Rhy, feel their connection.

"I love you, Dillan," Rhy whispered in his ear. "Everything about you: your soft smile, your mischievous behavior, your gentle heart, your cat ears and tail. You're mine, mate."

The whispered words had Dillan's heart filling with so much emotion he opened his mouth to speak. He cried out his release as the climax that racked his body took him by surprise. He clenched around Rhy and called out his name. Rhy wasn't far behind, biting into the bonding mark again, making Dillan's climax start anew as Rhy filled Dillan with his hot cum.

Dillan floated in the abyss of post-climax, trying to catch his breath. He felt when Rhy's softening dick slipped out of him, and he already strangely missed Rhy inside of him. As if he had the energy to go again.

Rhy fell to the side to avoid crushing Dillan with his larger body. As Rhy rolled onto his back, he automatically moved Dillan to lay on top of him. It was Dillan's favorite spot. Their hot, sweaty flesh clung together as they lay in bed, catching their breath.

"I love everything about you too. Thank you, Rhy."

Rhy kissed the top of his head before laying his head back down. "We should take a shower before going to bed," Rhy suggested.

Dillan sighed; he was too comfortable. "Can't move. My arms and legs have turned into spaghetti."

Rhy laughed as they lay there for a moment longer before Rhy sat up, making Dillan slide down. He was caught before hitting the floor or bed and easily carried into the bathroom.

Dillan blinked sleepy eyes up at Rhy. He was tired and, honestly, was

seconds away from passing out. The bathroom filled with fog as the shower went from cold to hot. Rhy planted Dillan on his feet, and he swayed before he caught himself. He stretched his arms above his head as a yawn worked its way out.

They got into the shower. Rhy washed Dillan first before washing himself. Dillan watched as the suds and water ran down Rhy's incredibly powerful body. He stood there, admiring. Usually, he would have at least helped Rhy, but he was barely keeping his eyes open.

Finally, Rhy turned the water off, and they moved out of the shower. Rhy toweled Dillan off, and he yawned, sleep claiming him fast

"Come on, before you fall asleep in the bathroom," Rhy said.

Dillan nodded as they went back to the bedroom, climbing into bed. Rhy lay down, and Dillan went to lay on top of him. His eyes closed as he relaxed and listened to his mate's heartbeat.

"We need to do something for Mary-Anne," Dillan said before he allowed sleep to claim him.

"Okay, I'll call Logan and we can come up with something in the morning. For now, sleep. You've had a tiring day."

Dillan sighed and listened to his mate as he drifted off to sleep.



RHY WOKE TO THE SMELL OF SOMETHING BURNING AND THE MISSING HEAT OF his mate's body on top of him. Rhy was out of bed and moving, running down the hall and toward the burning smell. He entered the kitchen to see a frazzled Dillan looking sadly at a pan of burned biscuits. At least, Rhy was guessing it was biscuits. They looked more like hockey pucks.

"Dillan, what are you doing?" Rhy asked.

Dillan looked over to him, his blue eyes pleading with Rhy, as if Rhy could magically turn the solid rocks into something edible.

"I was trying to make breakfast to bring to you in bed, but this happened and that." Dillan pointed to the skillet with tar on it in the sink.

Rhy wasn't even going to try and guess what was in the pan—it didn't look like anything that would even be considered food. He was warmed by the gesture, but he was sure Dillan should stay out of the kitchen due to fire hazards. Rhy eyed the tar-like substance again. He definitely needed to keep Dillan out of the kitchen, not only for his safety but for Rhy's too. There was no way Rhy would survive eating anything that Dillan tried cooking.

"Thank you, babe, but that isn't needed. Plus, we're meeting Logan at the

restaurant this morning. He said Kash got a job there."

Dillan's frown turned into a radiant smile in seconds. "Oh, good! Kash makes the best food."

Dillan raced past Rhy to get dressed. Rhy tossed the burned biscuits, and they hit the bottom of the trash can with a loud bang. He almost checked to make sure the bottom of the trashcan was still there. He put the dirty dishes in the sink and tidied up the kitchen before going back to the room to find a bouncing Dillan on the bed.

"Did you have coffee?" Rhy asked.

He hadn't bought any on the trip to the grocery store while Dillan visited Mary-Anne, because he hadn't wanted a repeat of the overly hyper Dillan.

"No," Dillan said, but he wouldn't look at Rhy.

Rhy stood there, looking at his mate, waiting for him to crack. It took exactly three seconds for Dillan to spill.

"Okay, I had a little sip of iced coffee. Logan got me the French vanilla flavor. I only had one cup. Waiting for you to wake up took so long, and so I needed something before I died of boredom," Dillan confessed.

Rhy needed to have a talk with Logan about corrupting his mate with the caffeinated beverages. It made Dillan too jumpy and all over the place. Rhy nodded and got dressed to get ready to go.

"Are you angry with me? Please tell me you aren't angry," Dillan pleaded. He stood by the closet door, hopping from foot to foot.

He had to have had more than one cup, Rhy thought. Rhy shook his head.

"Not upset," he said, pulling Dillan in for a kiss. He tasted the sweet French vanilla flavor followed by the bitter taste of coffee. "Just one cup?"

Dillan looked around the room, a big smile on his face. He finally looked at Rhy and blinked his big blue eyes innocently. "So what time are we meeting Logan again?"

Rhy shook his head, giving his mate one last kiss before putting his shirt on and grabbing his socks and shoes. He put them on and went to the

nightstand to collect his phone. He hadn't checked his messages last night. Once Dillan came out of the hospital, he was too wrapped up in making sure his mate was okay.

He was surprised by the number of texts from Logan. They had talked about meeting up for breakfast, so at first, Rhy thought they might already be late, but all the messages were from the night before. He read the messages, thumbing through them all.

They all said one thing. *Don't have sex tonight.*

Rhy blinked a few times in confusion.

"What?" Dillan asked as he moved to read the message over Rhy's shoulder. Dillan laughed out loud. "Little too late for that."

Rhy had to agree, but he wondered why Logan had messaged it. He would ask him once they saw him, so he shoved the phone into his pants pocket, stood, and headed toward the door. A bouncing Dillan already waited for him at the front door.

"This car ride is going to be the death of me," Rhy muttered.

"No, it won't," Dillan countered. He opened the door and ran to the elevator, pressing the button ten times in succession, as if pressing the button repeatedly would make the elevator magically appear.

"Maybe we should take the stairs to burn off some excess energy," Rhy suggested.

Dillan shrugged and turned to face him just as the elevator dinged and the doors slid open. Dillan did a one eighty and stepped into the elevator. Rhy sighed and got in with his mate. He watched Dillan as he struggled to stay still. They passed two floors before Dillan gave in and started talking a mile a minute.

"So, what do you think Logan meant by the messages? I mean, how are we not supposed to have sex? Come on. It's impossible. I mean, we sleep naked. It's *literally* impossible. Plus, the way you look at me just turns me on. See, you're doing it now. So, ho—"

Rhy kissed Dillan, wanting him to stop talking, but also because he was so cute when he was hyper. It was a lot to handle, but Rhy still couldn't resist his mate. He pulled back from the kiss just as the elevator doors opened. They got off and went to the parking lot.

The kiss seemed to do the job as Dillan walked quietly next to Rhy to the car. They made it all the way to the car and even got buckled up before Dillan started up again.

Rhy couldn't even understand what he was saying, because he was speaking so fast. It was a bunch of jargon about a show that he used to watch. Rhy let him talk about whatever it was, and he caught a few pieces about a witch and a black cat that could talk. He had no idea what show it was, but Dillan seemed to enjoy it. In no time, they arrived at the restaurant. Rhy picked out Logan's lime green Prius in seconds among the other cars.

Rhy turned to Dillan. He'd unbuckled but was still sitting there, staring at the restaurant. Rhy smiled, knowing that Dillan was waiting for Rhy to open the door. Rhy got out of the car and went over to Dillan's side, opening the door for him.

Dillan got out of the car and headed for the restaurant. Rhy reached out, stopping him. Dillan turned questioning eyes on him, and Rhy pulled him in for a kiss. At times, the feelings he had for Dillan came out and overwhelmed him. He loved his mate so much. He pulled back from the kiss. The dazed look on Dillan's face had Rhy smiling hard. He grabbed Dillan's hand and turned to go into the restaurant.

The place had a few people in it. Rhy scanned the room until he found Logan on the far wall in a booth. Rhy stopped at the hostess stand.

"My friend is already here, and I see him," he informed her.

The hostess nodded for him to go ahead. Rhy led Dillan to the back of the room and into the booth with Logan. Dillan went in first, with Rhy on the outside. Dillan picked up the menu and turned it over, reading through his choices.

"Iced coffee," Rhy said.

Logan sipped on his coffee, averting his eyes. "What was I supposed to do? Poor Dillan's been deprived of coffee his whole life. That's a damn crime," Logan said, taking another sip.

"No, what's a crime is that he can't sit still for more than three seconds without talking a mile a minute or jumping up and down," Rhy said. He pointed to Dillan who was tapping on the table, ignoring them as if they weren't talking about him.

Logan shook his head and tsked. "Once he builds a tolerance, it will mellow out."

Rhy shook his head. Talking to Logan about coffee was like talking to a brick wall—the only way to get through was to either ask him what flavor of coffee or how many cups to bring him.

Rhy sighed, giving up on the talk for now.

"Oh, your message definitely came too late," Dillan said.

Logan spit his coffee as he choked.

Rhy laughed and bumped Dillan as they both watched Logan collect himself and clean up the mess he'd made with the coffee.

"You waited till I took a sip, didn't you?" Logan asked Dillan.

Dillan looked up and batted his eyelashes. "What?" he asked, feigning ignorance.

Rhy laughed again.

"I don't know why you're laughing. Once you find out what this means, I hope you're prepared," Logan taunted.

The words confused Rhy. "What do you mean?"

Logan shook his head. "I'm not telling now."

Rhy sat back in the booth, trying to decipher the words, but there had been no real hint. He opened his mouth to ask what Logan meant, but the waiter came by just as he was about to ask. They all ordered their food. Dillan ordered the biscuits and gravy, Rhy going for pancakes, and Logan

waffles.

"So how was Mary-Anne?" Logan asked.

Rhy felt Dillan's mood plummet, as if all of a sudden, all the energy from just moments ago had been zapped out of him.

"She's not doing so well. She was only awake for a bit yesterday. She talked to me for a little bit."

"That's good," Logan said. "She was probably happy to see someone."

Rhy agreed. She didn't have any family except Dillan, but she didn't know he was a shifter and had a human body.

"Yeah, it was nice to be able to finally talk to her, but I'm sure she wants to see her cat one more time." A tear rolled down Dillan's face.

Rhy's hand went to his mate's leg. He squeezed, letting Dillan know he was here for him.

Logan nodded. "They won't let animals into the hospital, but once you're in, maybe slip into the bathroom and shift. We can go in and show Mary-Anne we at least found her cat. Put her mind at rest."

Dillan nodded, but said nothing else. Rhy pulled him in close to his side, comforting his mate. The food came, and, at first, Dillan pushed his away.

"You need to eat if you're going to shift and go see Mary-Anne," Rhy said. Dirty trick, using Mary-Anne, but he wanted Dillan to eat. It seemed to worked, since Dillan ate his food. They all dug in just as Kash came to the table, pushing Logan farther into the booth. Rhy was happy they got along.

"Hey, Dillan," Kash greeted.

Dillan smiled up at Kash. "Hey! This is amazing. I tried to make biscuits and gravy this morning."

Kash's eyebrows went up as he turned his golden eyes to Rhy. Rhy now knew what the tar-like substance in his sink was.

"The key word is *tried*," Rhy said.

Dillan elbowed him in the side. Kash and Logan both laughed at his expense.

"I have to work late tonight, but we're still on for a hunt/run thing on Thursday, right?" Kash asked.

Rhy nodded. It was still three days away. Dezi knew about Kash coming by, since he was supposed to come with Logan before, but had a job interview.

"Okay, I've got to get back to the kitchen. I just wanted to come out and talk to you guys before you left." Kash got up and headed back to work.

They finished up their food, and Rhy felt full from his meal. Dillan sighed happily next to him, and his leg had stopped bouncing. Rhy hoped the biscuits had soaked up most of the caffeine.

"I'm going to go see Kenny, but we'll meet at the hospital. Let's say around noon?" Logan said.

"How is he?" Rhy asked. He knew the answer, but he felt bad that he hadn't gone to see his friend.

"Shit," Logan said. He eyed Dillan before turning back to Rhy. "He's happy for you. He just can't be around it right now."

Rhy understood what it was. It was his bond with Dillan. Because his mate had accepted their pairing, whereas Kenny's was... Well, to put it lightly, a hot mess.

Logan got up from the table and left. Rhy turned to Dillan. They could go back to the apartment. He sighed. He couldn't go to the apartment knowing how much his friend was suffering. Rhy pulled out his phone, shooting a text to Morgan.

He got out the booth, planning something for him and Dillan to do. They did need a new skillet, since Rhy was certain the one at home wasn't salvageable.

Just as they walked out the door, his phone alerted him to a message. It was from Morgan. Rhy hadn't expected a response so quickly. It just had his address, so Rhy looked to Dillan.

"Feel up to going to a friend's house with me? Or I can drop you off at

home."

Dillan shook his head. "I'll go with you."

With that, they got into the car and headed toward Morgan's address.

In matter of a few minutes, they pulled up to an old set of apartments. Rhy turned off the car and got out, opened Dillan's door, and they moved down the row of doors until they made it to 3C. Rhy tapped on the thin door, afraid if he knocked too hard the door would come crashing down. A few moments passed before the door opened with a creak. An even paler Morgan appeared in the threshold. His cheeks had sunken in a little, and his brown hair was so greasy it looked nearly black.

"Come on in," Morgan said, moving to the side.

Dillan clutched Rhy's hand as they walked in. Morgan eyed Dillan, and Rhy realized they had never met.

"Morgan, this is my mate, Dillan. Dillan, this is Morgan."

Dillan stuck out his hand and smiled at Morgan. "Hi," he greeted.

Morgan eyed his hand all of a few second before shaking it. "Hi."

The studio apartment had only the bed and one chair to sit on. It was small but tidy. Rhy offered the chair to Dillan who shook his head. They both turned to Morgan standing by the door, pressing himself against the wall as if to make himself smaller.

"Morgan, what's the matter?" Rhy asked.

Morgan laughed a humorless laugh as he stood there, averting his eyes. "What isn't wrong?" He sighed and began to pace, the smell of fear filling the room.

"Morgan," Rhy said gently.

Morgan still jumped as if Rhy had shouted his name. Dillan stepped in front of Rhy and in the way of Morgan's pacing. Morgan stopped abruptly and stared at Dillan.

"Why don't we sit down?" Dillan suggested.

Morgan stood there for a moment longer until he nodded. Dillan led him

to the bed and sat along with Morgan. Dillan eyed Rhy and then looked at the chair. He indicated with his eyes for Rhy to take a seat. Rhy did and watched his mate as he put Morgan at ease, talking to him gently and in a calming manner. His presence wasn't threatening, and because he wasn't technically a hunter, he probably didn't make Morgan feel like prey.

Rhy watched as his mate slowly had Morgan smiling and laughing as they talked about the show with the witch and talking cat. Morgan seemed to enjoy the show as well, even talked about the remake and how he missed the talking cat part.

Their conversation died down, and Morgan finally relaxed and turned to look at Rhy. "Sorry I freaked out," he whispered.

"It's fine. More importantly, are you okay?" Rhy asked.

Morgan sighed a big breath and his shoulders slumped. "I don't know," he confessed.

"Tell me what's wrong."

"Everything is wrong, I can't eat or sleep, and when I'm at work, I jump at every shadow I see. I mean, I've always been a little scared, but that's because..." He stopped himself and shook his head. "But now it's worse."

Rhy nodded in understanding. He knew exactly what Morgan was feeling. Well, not exactly, but he understood the not eating and not sleeping part.

"And when Kenny comes around?" Rhy asked.

He knew his friend, and no matter what, he would come around and check on Morgan. Even if Morgan ran the other way, Kenny would still make sure he was okay.

Morgan's shoulders slumped even farther. "I run like a scared pup, although when I smell him, all of a sudden I can eat, and I don't feel scared. I feel..." His brown eyes look up, and he doesn't have to say it, because it's clearly written on his face.

"Safe," Dillan answered for him.

Morgan nodded.

"And that scares you more than being afraid of him?" Dillan asked. It was like they were connected—Rhy thought it and Dillan asked it.

Morgan looked down and nodded. "I know it's crazy, but it's just the way it is. I feel so safe with him around that it scares me. What's to say he won't lose his temper and hurt me?"

Rhy shook his head. It wasn't something he could ever imagine Kenny doing, especially to his true mate.

"Do you really feel like he will hurt you?" Dillan asked.

Morgan didn't answer, looking down at the carpeted floor with his hands clasped in his lap. Dillan looked up at Rhy before turning back to Morgan.

"Do you think Rhy will hurt you?" Dillan asked.

Morgan didn't answer right away, but shook his head no.

"Then why not give Kenny a chance? I haven't met him yet, but based on how the guys talk about him, he seems like a great guy. And if he tries to hurt you, I'll claw his eyes out," Dillan joked.

It worked, earning a laugh from Morgan that turned into a sigh. "He's beautiful."

Dillan nudged Morgan, nearly knocking him off the bed. "See, you already have a strong attraction to him."

Morgan laughed. "Anyone with eyes would have a strong attraction to him."

Dillan turned to Rhy. "Is he really that beautiful?"

Rhy didn't know how he felt about the question, but he nodded. He had no attraction to Kenny, but he had to admit the man was model beautiful.

"Well then, it's settled. You'll come run with us Thursday night, and I get to see the super beautiful Kenny. I say it's a win-win." Dillan stood from the bed with his arms in the air, cracking his back. He acted as if it was all a done deal.

Rhy eyed Morgan, waiting for him to come up with some way to get out

of it.

"Umm, okay," Morgan said to Rhy's surprise.

Dillan smiled at Morgan.

They stayed for a little while longer. They tried to get Morgan to eat a little bit, but he took one bite and couldn't eat anything else. Rhy didn't force him, knowing what he was going through. The food probably tasted like ashes and went down like sandpaper. They left with the promise of seeing Morgan Thursday night.

Dillan

DILLAN WAS NERVOUS TO SAY THE LEAST. HE SAT IN THE PASSENGER SEAT, outside of the hospital. His leg bounced up and down as they sat there. He knew Rhy was waiting on him and not the other way around, but Dillan was scared to go in there, knowing it would be his last time seeing Mary-Anne. He stared at his hands, twisting them and twiddling his thumbs.

"We can come back tomorrow," Dillan suggested, knowing that wasn't what he wanted. He wanted to see Mary-Anne, but fear clutched his heart and had him too scared to get out of the car.

Mary-Anne, the closest thing he had to a mom. He closed his eyes.

"Dillan." Rhy's hand cupped his cheek, bringing their faces together. "This isn't easy, and I know it hurts, but I know it will hurt worse if you don't get to say goodbye. Some people never have this opportunity. Even if you're in your cat form, she will have the comfort of knowing that Mr. Fluffkins is okay."

Rhy quirked a smile at calling him Mr. Fluffkins. Dillan didn't hate the name so much anymore; it made him smile. He'd rather be called Dillan, but he could handle being called Mr. Fluffkins.

He nodded. He knew he needed to go in there, but it hurt so much already, and he hadn't even said goodbye yet. Dillan pressed his lips lightly to Rhy's before turning and getting out of the car. He didn't wait for Rhy, needing to push himself to do it. If he stayed behind Rhy, he would chicken out and go back home.

Dillan walked through the sliding doors of the hospital. The disinfectant and smell of death overwhelmed him for a second. He went to the nurse's station to check in, then walked toward her room, remembering it from the night before.

He entered to find Mary-Anne asleep on the bed, still as a statue. If it wasn't for the constant beeping of the machine, he might have feared he was too late. Dillan went to the side of her bed. He clutched her hand for a bit before moving to the bathroom. He left the door ajar, so he could get out easily. He stripped out of his clothes and placed them to the side.

He closed his eyes and let the shift take over him; it had become second nature as he went from one form to the other. He opened his eyes and everything seemed bigger and taller than him. He poked his head out the door, looking around the room to make sure none of the nurses had stepped in while he was shifting. The coast was clear.

Dillan left the bathroom, moving farther into the room. He looked up at the bed and scooted back a little. It'd been a while since he'd jumped as a cat. He leapt and landed on the bed, barely missing landing on top of Mary-Anne. Dillan applauded himself for not landing on and hurting Mary-Anne.

He approached her head and meowed—something he rarely did—but he needed for her to wake up. He didn't do it too loudly, for fear someone would hear. He rubbed himself against her hand. Maybe feeling his fur would wake her.

For a while, nothing worked. Dillan kept trying, from meowing to purring to cuddling close to her. Just as he was about to give up and go find Rhy, Mary-Anne's eyes blinked open. The surprised look on her face at seeing him

had Dillan wanting to shift into a human form to hug her and tell her how much he loved her and never wanted her to leave him.

"Mr. Fluffkins," she croaked and coughed.

It sounded as if it hurt. There was a water cup on the table near her. Dillan went over to the cup of water and meowed to get her attention. She smiled at him even as she coughed and reached for the water. She took small sips as the cough settled down. Dillan went back over to her now that she was up a little. Her shaky hand reached for the remote of the bed, and she pressed the button to raise the back of the bed so that she was in a sitting position.

Her hand rubbed down Dillan's back as she petted him. He saw the tears in her eyes.

"If this is a dream, I don't want to wake up," she muttered.

She sat there petting him as she flipped the TV on, and it was as if they were transported back into the house, and they sat there watching TV as Mary-Anne held him.

"You've grown a little," she commented.

He hadn't, but he continued to purr as she petted him. He was happy for the moment. It was as if time had frozen and everything was okay. Mary-Anne would be there forever. Dillan knew it wouldn't be the case, but right then and there, he let himself believe it would be.

"You know, Mr. Fluffkins, I'm going to go see Sam." Her voice was barely over a whisper.

It broke Dillan's heart, and he meowed, turning to look at her. She stopped petting and stared him in the eyes. Tears fell down her cheeks.

"I'm glad I got to see that you were okay," she said. She blinked and another tear fell. She went back to watching the TV and petting Dillan. "I met a boy, or really probably a man, but he had the same eyes as you. Made me miss you so much more."

Oh, how his heart ached to shift and hug her, to let her know it was him. That he was okay and was grateful to have had her in his life. There was a

knock at the door. Dillan smelled them before they entered. He didn't rush to get up as Logan and Rhy walked in the room.

"Oh, dear me," Mary-Anne said as she wiped her eyes.

"Hello, Mrs. Crawford. We're sorry to cut your time short, but the nurses are about to do their rounds, and we better get Mr. Fluffkins out of here," Rhy said.

Mary-Anne's hand stopped, and she nodded. "Yes, don't want you two getting in trouble." She sighed, looking down at Dillan. "Where will you take him?"

Rhy stepped up. "If it's okay with you, ma'am, I'll keep him with me. I'll take good care of him. Feed and love him with all of my heart."

Dillan was caught off guard. He already lived with Rhy, but the way he said it was like he was asking Mary-Anne if Rhy could marry her daughter. Except Dillan was a man, and Mary-Anne thought he was just a cat. But the notion of it wasn't lost on him.

Mary-Anne beckoned Rhy closer, and she reached out and hugged him. Rhy's face was one of surprise as he hugged her back.

"Thank you," she said. She patted him on the back and smiled at him.

She looked over at Logan, beckoning for him to come over there as well. She reached out for a hug. Logan hesitated for a second before hugging her, and she thanked him. She whispered something in his ear that even Dillan couldn't hear. Logan pulled back from the embrace, smiling at her and nodding. Dillan went to her, and she hugged him lightly one last time. He purred and snuggled into her, trying to convey all the love he had for her.

She handed him over to Rhy, tears streaming down her face. "Glad he's going to a good home."

The nurse knocked on the door, and Mary-Anne looked to Rhy and Dillan. Rhy put Dillan in his coat, shielding him from view.

"Just need to use the bathroom," Logan said.

Dillan couldn't see anything going on around him.

"Goodbye, Mrs. Crawford," Rhy said.

"Bye, dear, take care." Her soft words reached Dillan's ears, and he felt the pang of her loss already.

Movement and then cold air for a few seconds before Dillan heard the car door open, and he was gently placed on the seat. Dillan didn't shift; he didn't feel like it. He knew once he was in his human form he would cry, and there would be no controlling it. A knock on the window alerted them to Logan's arrival. Rhy rolled the window down as Logan passed the clothes over to him. Dillan sat there, staring down at the floor.

"Text me if you need anything," Logan said.

"Okay," Rhy said before rolling the window up. "Are you going to stay shifted?"

Dillan nodded. He would shift back later, but he wasn't ready just yet.

"Okay, sweetheart," Rhy said, his big hand rubbing down Dillan's back.

Dillan was happy that Rhy didn't try and force him to shift.



DILLAN HAD NO idea when they made it home or when Rhy had taken him up to the apartment, but he lay there on the bed as Rhy took a shower. Dillan thought about joining him, but he still wasn't ready to shift. A clean Rhy walked into the room and turned off the lights, but Dillan still saw everything. He watched as Rhy climbed into bed and lay down. Rhy's hands reached out and picked him up, laying Dillan on his chest.

"You can't run from your emotions, but with that being said, I'll be right here when you're ready," Rhy said.

Dillan watched his mate as Rhy fell asleep, his snores tempting Dillan to sleep as he lay on top of him. No matter how long he closed his eyes, sleep wasn't coming. He got up and left the bedroom and the warmth of his mate. In the living room, he sat on the couch stared at nothing in particular. Rhy

didn't have a TV in the living room, just two couches and a small coffee table.

Dillan sat there until the creak of the floor had him turning. He must have fallen asleep at some point, because Rhy was sitting down next to him. Dillan got up and looked at his mate.

"Dillan," Rhy called out softly, patting his leg.

Dillan sat on his lap, and Rhy didn't say anything, just sat there waiting on Dillan. Just like in the car, Rhy was just there. It didn't matter that he probably wanted Dillan to say something—he simply waited for Dillan. No pressure. It made Dillan's love for him swell ten-fold. How he was so lucky to get a mate like Rhy, he didn't know.

Dillan closed his eyes and let the shift take over him. He thought about his human body, and in seconds, he was in his human form.

He opened his eyes and stared at Rhy, his mate kissing him softly.

"It's okay to cry," Rhy said.

And like a floodgate bursting open, Dillan cried, his face pressed against Rhy's chest. Dillan had no idea how long he sat there; he only knew that Rhy held him the whole time, whispering loving words to him as he mourned the loss of Mary-Anne. Of the life he'd had before.

The sun shone through the curtains, and the tears had long dried up. Dillan sat there, tearless cries still making him tremble in his mate's arms. He snuggled in closer to Rhy, soaking in all the comfort he could.

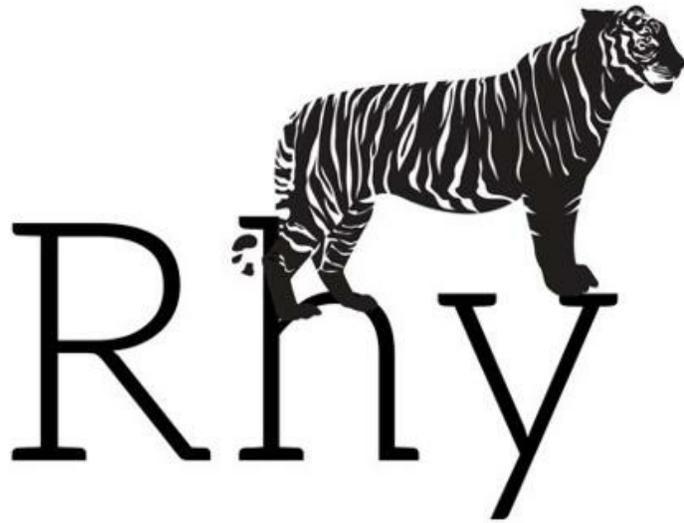
"Thank you," Dillan said.

Rhy said nothing as he continued to hold him. Dillan was where he belonged. He would never forget Mary-Anne or Sam; they had been the biggest part of his life to this point.

"You feel like going to the bed now?" Rhy asked.

Dillan laughed a little. He was sleepy now that he'd cried out all of his tears and felt emotionally drained. He nodded and wrapped his arms around Rhy's neck as Rhy carried him back into the bedroom. Rhy flopped down on

the bed with Dillan and continued to hold him as Dillan fell asleep.



RHY WAS HAPPY HE HAD A JOB WHERE HE COULD AFFORD A FEW DAYS AWAY. He'd messaged Dezi that he would need time to help his mate. After they left the hospital and Dillan had come to terms with Mary-Anne's deteriorating illness. They'd gotten a call a day later, letting them know she had passed on. She had left instructions for the hospital to call and tell Rhy.

He had received another call from one of Mary-Anne's friends, letting him know that she was thankful that he took her cat, and that she would handle everything with the house and Mary-Anne's belongings. Needless to say, they'd ended up missing the hunt on Thursday. Dillan wasn't ready to be around a lot of people.

Two weeks went by and Dillan was kind of doing better. He still cried sometimes, but when Rhy suggested he stay home one more day, Dillan practically pushed Rhy out the door to go to work.

Rhy walked into the office, and Cole was getting coffee. Rhy stopped to grab a cup. He'd stayed up late the night before, because Dillan had been sick and throwing up most of the night. He took out his phone, messaging Dillan and asking him if he was alright. He got a bunch of emojis in response. He

sighed. Ever since they'd gotten a cell phone for Dillan, Logan had taken it upon himself to teach Dillan the emoji language.

"What the hell does red face emoji and the hand mean? Ugh, now he sent a heart with a crying emoji. Do you think I should go back home?" Rhy asked Cole.

Cole laughed, reaching for the phone. He turned the phone to face him and looked over the message. "I'm pretty sure he's saying stop worrying and he loves you." Cole put his hand on his chin, glaring at the phone for a little while longer. "You know who would know what the heck this says? Logan."

Rhy nodded; he'd figured as much. "So any new clients?"

Cole shrugged. "I have a cheating case to look into. Girlfriend is sixty percent sure her boyfriend is cheating on her. He disappears at random times... You know, the usual. Clyde is out on a job now. He's tracking a brother that ran away. Sister just wants to know he's safe."

"Anything that needs to be done?" Rhy asked.

Cole laughed as he sipped his coffee, the dimples in his cheeks showing as he flashed his charming smile. Rhy filled with dread. Cole only used his charming smile when it was bad news, as if his dimples could soften the blow in some way.

"Well, the back room with papers needs to be organized."

Of course it does, Rhy thought.

He grabbed his coffee cup and headed to the room where everyone tossed boxes in without any order. Rhy opened the door, but he closed his eyes before he saw the mess. He took in a deep breath and opened one eye at a time. He couldn't even see the walls any longer. The floor had always been gone, but now the boxes stacked so high that it covered the walls. Rhy groaned. He picked his phone up and sent another message to Dillan.

Rhy: *You sure you don't need me at home?*

Rhy waited, expecting a ton of emojis that he would have to decipher like Morse code, but instead, Dillan sent a worded text back.

Dillan: *I love you, Rhy. Have fun at work.*

Rhy read the message over again to make sure there was no hidden emoji that meant he was needed at home. Unable to find one, Rhy went into the abyss of boxes. He squeezed between them until he made it to the middle. Well, as close as he was going to get to the middle.

"Guess I'll start here," he muttered as he opened the first box.

Time passed as he opened box after box and went through the contents. Some of the papers he shredded and disposed of, and some he sorted back into boxes and stacked them out of the way. He made it through a third of the room. He finally dragged himself out to grab a snack and to call and check on Dillan.

He grabbed a banana nut muffin, biting into it as he hit the button to call Dillan and pressed the phone against his ear.

The phone rang three times before Dillan answered it.

"Hey, Rhy," Dillan croaked out, his voice sounding like his throat was raw.

"What's the matter?" Rhy asked.

Dillan sighed. "I think that bug is back. I felt fine this morning, but now I've just given the toilet my whole lunch."

"I'm on my way home," Rhy said.

"No, you haven't been to work in a while, and I'm just tired now. I'll sleep it off," Dillan rushed out.

Rhy contemplated going home anyway. He wanted to check on Dillan and possibly get him to a doctor, but he would need to call a shifter doctor. They could be hard to track down. It was so rare for shifters to get sick that they were a rarity. Rhy made a mental note to ask Dezi if he knew about any shifter doctors.

"Okay, well I'll bring some soup home, and we can stay in an—"

"We're supposed to be going to Dezi's, remember? I finally convinced Morgan to go, since he missed out on the last one, and Kash already

confirmed that he had it off and would be available. Everyone is finally free. We're going tonight. I'm not missing this just because I'm a little sick."

Rhy sighed, knowing there was no changing Dillan's mind.

"Plus, Morgan is nervous. There is no way I'm going to leave him to go in there alone."

Rhy smiled. His mate was a feisty thing when in protective mode. "Okay, well get some rest, and if at any time at Dezi's you feel sick, you tell me and we'll go home."

There was silence for a second before Dillan agreed. With the reassurance, Rhy hung the phone up and turned to go back to his room of torture. He ran into Logan just as he was coming down the hall.

"Was that Dillan?" Logan asked.

"Yeah," Rhy answered.

"How's he feeling?" Logan asked.

Rhy opened his mouth and then closed it, remembering what Logan had said a couple of weeks ago. "He's nauseous and a little achy. Why? You know something, don't you?"

Logan nodded. "I do, and I think I should wait to tell you," Logan teased. He moved around Rhy, grabbing the coffee and pouring a cup full of the black substance.

Rhy was nervous. "Just tell me he is going to be okay," he pleaded.

Logan didn't hesitate. "He will be fine. Might have swollen feet, puke for a bit, and have sudden bursts of tears or yell at you about the way you snore, but other than that, he should be fine."

"What's wrong with how I snore? Did Dillan say something about it?"

Logan lifted his trimmed eyebrows and sipped his coffee. "I can't dish out friend secrets," he said as he walked past Rhy and headed back into his office.

Rhy sighed. He sent a text to Dillan and another to Morgan to let him know that he would give him a lift to Dezi's. His phone dinged with a

message from Morgan.

Morgan: *Okay, Dillan told me to be ready by five-thirty.*

Rhy put his phone away and went back to box hell.



HE WALKED INTO THE APARTMENT, smelling something sweet emitting from the kitchen. He ran into the kitchen, prepared to save Dillan from whatever he was cooking. There stood Kash, making cookies. Relief flooded Rhy. He resolved to ban Dillan from the kitchen. Not everyone was meant to cook, and Dillan was a prime example.

"Hey, why are you in such a rush?" Dillan asked as he walked out of the living room and right up to Rhy. He offered his lips for a kiss.

Rhy would never tire of that. He pulled back from the kiss, Dillan's mouth tasting of fresh mint. "How are you feeling?" Rhy asked.

Dillan smiled at him, but Rhy could see the tired lines near his eyes and the wrinkle between his eyebrows. Rhy rubbed his thumb on the line, trying to smooth it out.

"I have a little bit of a headache, but before you cancel all the plans, I want to go and promise to take it easy."

Rhy looked into his mate's blue eyes, contemplating just canceling, but he knew how much Dillan wanted to go. He was finally ready to be around the others, and he really wanted to help Morgan.

"Okay," Rhy relented.

The huge smile that broke out over Dillan's face made it worth agreeing. Rhy looked over to Kash who put the last of the cookies into a container.

"Staying with Logan helps, but if I make cookies there, he eats them faster than they can come out the oven," Kash said.

Rhy didn't doubt it. "You riding with us then?"

Kash shrugged. He took the band out of his hair, his golden locks framing

his face. He picked up the container of cookies. "I'm ready."

"Come on then; we have to pick up Morgan," Rhy said.

They all piled into the car and went to get Morgan. Dillan's leg bounced anxiously.

"Did you have any coffee?" Rhy asked.

"No, a few cookies, but that's it," Dillan said.

Rhy looked in the rearview mirror at Kash who nodded in confirmation.

"Dillan and coffee are like a five-year-old and a whole bag of cotton candy. It's a disaster waiting to happen," Kash said.

"It is not, and Logan said once I drink it on a regular basis that part will go away," Dillan said.

Rhy had to agree with Kash. Dillan should just stay away from coffee, and the amount needed to get used to it was out of the question.

Rhy stopped the car outside of Morgan's apartment. He sent a message to Morgan but got no reply so he sent another one. The click and ding of the seatbelt warning alerted him to Dillan getting out of the car.

"Be right back," Dillan said.

He was gone in a flash and knocking at Morgan's door in the blink of an eye. Rhy watched as Dillan knocked a few more times before the door finally opened. Morgan didn't come out, but Dillan went in.

"Is he okay?" Kash asked, concern in his voice.

Rhy sighed. "Yeah, Morgan is a little skittish, but he's a good guy."

Kash nodded, and they both watched the door, waiting for Dillan and Morgan to emerge. Minutes passed and then Rhy's phone alerted him to a message. He pulled it up.

Dillan: Tell Kash to sit in the front. I'm going to sit in the back with Morgan.

Rhy relayed the message—just in time—as Morgan and Dillan came out. Morgan's hair was no longer greasy looking and appeared freshly washed, but his shoulders were slumped. He was a little taller than Dillan, but the way he

was walking it made it seem as if they were the same size. Dillan opened the back door, and Morgan climbed in. He kept his hands in his lap as he looked down at them.

"Hey, Morgan, this is Kash," Rhy introduced them.

"Hello, Morgan," Kash said.

He gave a charming smile, and to Rhy's surprise, Morgan looked up and returned the smile. "Hi."

"Alright, we're all ready," Dillan said as he sat and buckled up.

Rhy nodded, and they headed to Dezi's. The closer they got, the more the smell of fear rose in the car. Rhy looked in the rearview mirror. Morgan trembled in his seat as Dillan whispered reassuring words to him. Not too long and they were pulling up in Dezi's driveway.

"Give us a minute, and we will follow you two," Dillan said.

Kash got out of the car, and Rhy followed. Rhy made it to the front door with Kash, but he turned to look at the car, watching Dillan talk to Morgan for a bit before he left it to his mate.

"Come on, I'll introduce you to everyone," Rhy said.

He turned the knob and entered the house as he always did, since Dezi's open door policy was known to all of the guys. He headed down the hall and toward the yelling and cheers. Rhy stopped before he made it all the way to the others. Turning, he noticed Kash wasn't right behind him. Kash stood at the other end of the hall, eyes wide and breathing hard.

"Hey, you guys made it." Logan's voice came from around the corner. He walked up to Rhy, and they both stared at Kash in confusion. "Wha—"

"Hey. You finally made it," Dezi's deep voice said as he approached, placing his hand on Rhy's shoulder.

Before Rhy could say anything, a fierce growl filled the hallway. Rhy turned to see a very angry Kash. He'd dropped the cookies, and it was like watching a movie where they slowed the action down so the viewers could see everything that happened.

Rhy watched as Kash ran toward Dezi and tackled him. They went to the floor in a loud crash. Rhy moved Logan to the side as Dezi and Kash shifted right there in the hallway. Clothes shredded as they changed into their cat forms.

The hallway was large, but not big enough to hold two large cats. Dezi was an enormous lion, and he shook out his mane. Kash was more of a mountain lion, so no mane, but he hissed at Dezi.

"What the hell is going on?" Cole asked, standing at the end of the hallway.

Rhy was just as confused. Kash wasn't hostile or even remotely alpha acting. For him to challenge Dezi out of the blue confused Rhy. The front door opened and surprised gasps from Morgan and Dillan had Rhy trying to figure something out fast. He needed to get Dezi and Kash to either shift back or go outside.

Kenny appeared, and, once he saw the scared look on Morgan's face, he began to move. Rhy saw a huge fight coming, and he didn't think that would help anyone.

"Wait!" Logan shouted.

Everyone's eyes went to him, except Dezi and Kash who were doing a face off, neither one of them moving.

"Logan, we need to get them out of the house," Cole said.

Logan, pressed against the wall, nodded. "Yeah, fucking lions and their mating rituals."

Everyone froze at the realization.

"Did you just say 'mating rituals'?" Rhy asked.

Logan nodded.

"We'll talk more about that once they are out. Cole open the back door. Maybe we can get to Dezi to take it outside. Rhy and Logan, slowly move toward Morgan and Dillan and protect them just in case we can't get them outside," Kenny instructed.

Rhy and Logan moved carefully, making sure not to catch Kash or Dezi's attention as they headed toward Dillan and Morgan. They made it over to them, and Rhy wrapped Dillan in his arms. He moved Morgan behind him, conscious of Kenny watching him. He would help keep Kenny's mate safe, but he knew what it felt like for someone to touch your mate, especially with them not being mated.

"Dezi, you should go outside. It's dangerous in the house," Kenny said.

Neither Dezi or Kash moved. Kenny tried again, but that time, he took a step toward them. It got both of their attention.

"Take that shit outside," he gritted out. He moved to the side for them to make a beeline for the back door.

Kash growled and hissed at Dezi but ran out of the door. Dezi dashed after him. Cole closed the door, and they all sighed in relief.

"Man, they are really going at it. Logan, are you sure this is okay?" Cole asked, looking out the backdoor window.

They all turned to Logan who seemed to have most of the answers when it came to true mates. Rhy more than ever before wanted to know Logan's past.

"Yeah, they're fine. They'll fight until either Dezi or Kash wins. If Dezi wins, that means their mating will work. But if Kash wins, then that means Dezi will have to get stronger before Kash's lion will accept him as his true mate. Lions are a tricky thing," Logan said.

"And you wanted to stay home," Dillan said.

Rhy looked down at his mate, a huge smile on his face. "Yes, because you're sick," Rhy reminded him.

"What? Are you okay? Shifters can get sick?" Morgan asked, moving to look Dillan over. They had become such good friends.

"I'm not sick, just throwing up occasionally. I might've eaten something bad, that's all," Dillan said. He elbowed Rhy in the stomach.

Logan headed down the hall. "All these mates popping up all at once is

going to give me a headache."

"Logan, wait," Rhy called out. He moved them toward Logan. Morgan walked with them, his concern for Dillan overriding his fear of being close to Kenny.

"You said you'd tell me what's wrong with Dillan," Rhy reminded him.

Logan looked at him like he was crazy. "I guess my hints weren't enough."

They hadn't been.

Logan sighed, picking up the container of cookies Kash had dropped. He opened the container, taking a cookie out. "It's simple." He pointed the cookie at Dillan. "He's pregnant. Congratulations, Rhy, you're going to be a dad."

The End.

Author Note



THANK YOU FOR READING HIS BEWILDERED MATE. DILLAN AND RHY'S story isn't over. They are now expecting a bundle of joy, the birth will occur in the next book which will be Kash and Dezi's story. This series will be heavily written together and there will be no standalones. If you don't mind I would greatly appreciate a review once you finish the book.

-Brea Alepou

His Royal Mate
Unexpected Mates Book 2



He breathed heavily as he dodged a swipe from the lion in front of him. The fucker was huge, but everything in Kash screamed for him to fight him. To challenge his standing, no matter if he was mentally arguing with himself that there was no way in hell he would win. The beast of a lion had taken Kash down twice, and twice Kash had wiggled his way free. Kash had grown up with four brothers and two sisters of various ages, but they were all brought up to fight. It was the way of shifters—you didn't survive in their world without being able to defend yourself. Because of Kash's smaller body, many challengers thought he'd be easy and weak, but Kash had honed his skills in fighting in cougar form and human form, so getting out of a pinned position was his specialty. Still, he was having a hard time getting out of the other lion's hold.

His lion was having fun challenging the other lion as if it was a sport.

Unlike Kash, who was a cougar, the beast in front of him had a huge mane surrounding his face. Its dark color only made the few strands of blond in the mane stand out even more. The lion was darker in color than Kash's cougar and easily two hundred plus pounds heavier. A growl emitted from deep within Kash's chest. It was a clear warning but also playful.

The lion in front him was none other than Rhy's and Logan's alpha, but still Kash wasn't stupid, he wasn't going to challenge the alpha lion.

Kash was pinned down, unable to move, and he couldn't seem to break free. And instead of panic filling him, he felt a weighted peace. He had to be going insane. The most tantalizing scent tickled his senses. A shiver racked down his body as a purr escaped him. All logic went out of his head, and his cougar was in complete control. He knew right then and there the lion on top of him was his one and only true mate.

The lion had completely overpowered him and showed him he was worthy of being his mate. Kash mewled as he tried one more time to shake his mate from his back, his human side kicking back in. Sharp teeth bit down on his shoulder, not hard enough to break the skin but just the right amount of pressure that had Kash's mountain lion side settling down. The growl from above him pierced him to his core, making him want to do nothing more than to roll over and submit to his mate.

It wasn't long before the teeth disappeared from his shoulder, leaving Kash with a slight feeling of disappointment. But at the same time, he was happy his mate hadn't just claimed him right then and there with a claiming bite. Kash was still unsure about the whole fated mate thing, and he just wasn't ready. The weight never left from on top of him, even as he felt his mate above him shift.

"Shift back now," a strong, deep voice said.

That voice alone would have made Kash roll over and bare his throat. His cougar was pleased with their mate, had no problem giving his underbelly. But Kash's human side had some thoughts, and most of them were questions.

Kash allowed the shift to happen, his body naturally going from his sleek cougar form to his human skin, fur receding and bones cracking as they reshaped. After years of shifting since the age of ten, the pain was minimal; if anything, it was more of an all-over itch.

Kash was breathless as the cool grass brushed against his bare skin. He was all too aware of the large man on top of him. He pressed his forehead against the ground as he sucked in lungfuls of air. He was hoping for fresh oxygen; instead, he was just breathing in lungfuls of his mate's scent. It made him dizzy, and his cock stirred and his ass clenched. Kash balled his fist in the grass, fighting the urge to press his ass up against his mate's naked form.

Fuck, he needs to get off. Kash was a hair trigger from losing the little control he had.

"You mind getting off of me now?" Kash wheezed out.

A moment passed and he thought maybe the man didn't hear him, but before he could ask again, his mate slowly got up. The weight no longer held Kash down, and his heat no longer pressed against Kash, but a sudden chill had him shivering.

Kash ignored it and the feeling of wanting to ask the man to lie back on top of him. Kash pushed himself up, but a growl had him freezing on the spot. Kash's eyes darted over to where the man now sat cross-legged. He was naked, of course—they had just shifted—but still, the knowledge didn't stop Kash's eyes from traveling up and down the man's body. He was all muscle and broad shoulders, with a chest that looked good enough to bite, and thick arms and legs. Kash took his fill in; he couldn't look away, but when he made it to the man's cock, he nearly choked, forgetting how to breathe.

"Are you pleased by what you see, mate?" That deep voice sent shivers down Kash's spine.

"If by pleased you mean scared for my life, then yes."

There was a deep rumbling laugh that made Kash look away from the impressive length and into dark brown eyes.

“You’re Kash, the one who helped Dillan out?”

Kash nodded, unable to remember if the others had ever said their alpha’s name. He was either too nervous to remember or too distracted by all the tempting flesh in front of him.

A large hand stretched out toward him, palm up. “I’m Dezi Felder. I am the alpha here. I’m truly pleased to meet my mate.” Dezi’s dark eyes ran up and down Kash’s body. When Kash didn’t immediately stretch his hand out to shake Dezi’s, he watched as his mate’s lips slightly dipped in a frown before a recovering smile was plastered on his face.

Kash knew when he was being admired, and he couldn’t lie to himself, it felt good to have such a strong and good-looking man look him up and down with undeniable heat. Kash slowly sat back on his calves and turned to face his mate, not hiding any part of himself. The way Dezi’s hands balled into fists before a deep groan left him, as if he was doing everything he could to hold back but was barely succeeding. It gave Kash a rush of power he had never felt.

Kash tucked his hair behind his ear before clearing his throat. “So, you’re the alpha?” Kash knew the answer, but his brain was still trying to catch up with the rest of his body.

Dezi seemed to catch on and smiled charmingly at Kash. “And I am your fated mate.”

Kash let out a deep sigh. “Don’t get any ideas, just because my cougar side has accepted this.” He gestured widely between the two of them. “Doesn’t mean shit. I—” He went silent for a moment, catching himself before he told a complete stranger his whole damn past. Kash shook his head. “I don’t get the whole fated or true mates crap. I’ve fallen in love before, and it’s not all it’s cracked up to be. What’s to say being with my fated mate will be any different?”

There, he’d voiced his biggest concern, the one that ate at him the most ever since Dillan had found his true mate. How did he know it would work?

Or would it blow up in his face and have him crying into three buckets of cookie dough ice cream?

The pull to crawl on his hands and knees over to Dezi and climb him like a jungle gym was insane. Kash wanted nothing more than to rub his nose right below Dezi's ear, breathing in his scent where it was strongest.

Balling his fist and fighting his natural instincts, Kash was able to keep himself in place.

Stay strong.

Dezi's eyes scanned Kash with so much scrutiny that Kash had to hold back the squirm his stare induced.

"I must earn your trust, then," Dezi said.

Kash was surprised by that. He'd expected Dezi to beat his chest and tell him he was his mate and alpha. Kash's head tilted to the side as he looked Dezi up and down one more time, applauding himself for not staring at his mate's impressive cock.

"Okay," Kash said.

A charming smile came onto Dezi's face. He stood and Kash's eyes once again strayed. A hand appeared in front of his face.

"We should go back in," Dezi said.

Kash stared at the offered hand and then up to Dezi's eyes. One touch and he would be a goner. Kash stood on his own and dusted off the grass and dirt on his ass. He looked over to the door and groaned. Dillan was front and center, eyes wide, staring at both of them.

"Yeah, let's go in," Kash said.

Dezi's hand fell back, but he still smiled at Kash. "After you, mate."

The word shouldn't make his heart skip, but it did. Kash ignored it and headed into the house.

[Click Here](#) for your copy of *His Royal Mate*

Join the Heart Family



I have a facebook reader group, where we talk about all things that are books. I share early teasers, cover reveals, snippets of WIPs and cat pictures. So come for the books, smexy men, and smexy women but stay for pictures of my cat Bagheera. I'd love for you to join the Heart Family.

Facebook Group: [Brea's Hearts](#)

About the Author

Keep updated on what Brea Alepou is working on, Subscribe to her [Newsletter](#).

Brea Alepou realized her dream was to write and tell stories after spending five years in college getting a degree. She has since been writing and letting her imagination free. She thought she would only write contemporary at first but soon found her love for making worlds. So now she rights it all. With her wild imagination, expect lots of different stories, from fairies ruling, to vampires killing everyone, to the sweet loving between two men, passion between two fierce women, or the love of multiple partners. She believes that everyone deserves love even if not all of her characters get it right away. Love is passionate, hot, needy, confusing, painful, draining, fulfilling, and all-consuming.

M/M & F/F Romance: Paranormal, Contemporary, Dark, Fantasy, Shifter Mpreg, Shifter Fpreg, & Harem

There will be a book for everyone.

Insanity is Contagious. [Brea Alepou](#)

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