



Jumping the BULL



an evel worlds FUC Academy story

JENN BURKE

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A FUC ACADEMY STORY

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FOREWORD

A note from Eve Langlais...

I'm beyond excited for the first m/m book to make an appearance in the F.U.C. world. I met Jenn Burke through our local romance writer group, and I'm tickled she's chosen to participate. She's written some fantastic sci-fi and paranormal stories so I just know you're going to fall in love with her EveL World characters, Ben and Oliver. A bison and a whooping crane who are with tasked with a super secret mission.

Buckle in for suspense, intense heat, great humor and a house hippo? LOL

~Eve

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, thank you so much to Eve for allowing me to play in her Furry United Coalition world. Writing this book was lots of fun, and you, my dear, are an absolute gem.

Thanks also to Jessica Ripley for all of her hard work coordinating everything. I have no idea how you kept it all straight. Huge kudos!

To my Monday night writing peeps—you know who you are—you always brighten my week. Thank you!

And a big thank you to my Ottawa Romance Writers buddies. You guys have given me a community that has enriched my writing life immensely.

Finally, thank you to my family for their continuing and unwavering support. I love you all.

~ Jenn

INTRODUCTION



Ben Beaufort, badass bison

Everyone who looks at Ben and sees his six-foot-plus, muscular build assumes he's in construction. Or the military. Or something that requires brawn over brains. In truth, he's a mild-mannered human resources professional—or at least he was, until he got laid off. Now he's looking for a second career as a Furry United Coalition agent, to discover how truly badass he can be.

Oliver Zuraw, whoop-ass whooping crane

Oliver's enjoying a second career too, from exotic dancer to the FUC Academy's yoga instructor. Big, badass men like Ben are totally his type—but he's sworn them off, because they're never good news. Except Ben is defying all of Oliver's preconceived notions and making him wonder if maybe this bison is just the right type of badass for him.

A simple undercover mission that turns out to be not so simple

When an undercover mission needs a bison shifter, Ben jumps at the chance to put his training to use. A twist of events forces Oliver and Ben to pretend to be married...which leads to an invitation to work for the bad guy on his bad guy ranch doing bad guy things. There's no way they can pass up the opportunity to infiltrate the criminal operation.

Even if they're a recruit and a civilian instructor who barely know what they're doing.

And even if there's only one bed waiting for them.

Does this premise and world seem familiar? That's because it is based off the [Eve Langlais Furry United Coalition](#). Eve Langlais has invited her author friends to come and play in her world. To find out more, visit Worlds.EveLanglais.com.



Ben Beaufort managed to turn the knob of his apartment door without dropping the box in his hands, then kicked it open with maybe a little more force than necessary. It popped back and slammed into the wall, and he grimaced at the crash.

"What the—" His sister, Diana, burst out of her room down the hall, then stopped and stared at him. "You're home early."

"Yep." The word was short, abrupt, and he sighed. The sudden mess of his life wasn't Didi's fault.

"And with a box. Why do you have a box?" She came closer, and noticed what was in the box. "Oh my god, did you—"

"Get laid off?" He put the box on the floor next to the entryway table and turned his attention to the spot where the door had connected with the wall. Yep, that was a dent. Just a small one, since the spring thing had taken the brunt of the force, but something he'd have to fix before the super saw it. He closed the door and faced his sister. "I did indeed. They 'restructured' the HR department to make it more efficient and focused and blah blah blah."

He didn't protest when Didi enveloped him in her arms. She wasn't small, by any means—in a crowd of women, she towered over them, being more than six feet tall and sharing the thick, solid

build of her inner bison cow. It was times like this that he loved the fact that they'd chosen to live together when they moved off the ranch and into the city. Ben leaned into her embrace, revelling in it like he would a good wallow in soft dirt.

"You loved that job," Didi said softly.

He nodded against the crook of her shoulder and neck. He really had. He'd been with InnovaTech for ten years. It was his home away from home. The foundation of his career. He'd worked at another, smaller company for his first couple of years out of university, but InnovaTech had been where he'd bloomed and come into his own as a human resources professional. His manager had been thrilled with his contributions, both in reducing the workload of their team with his innovative changes to their processes, to the fun events he'd suggested to raise the morale of all employees on a regular basis. Guess all that meant nothing. The executives didn't care that he'd put his heart and soul into his job. That he'd cared for the people he worked with and for. He was just a number. An expendable, erasable number.

He sniffled.

"Aw, baby." Didi squeezed him harder. "You know what you need?"

"A wallow?"

"Definitely. But tomorrow. Tonight, you need junk food and tequila."

He lifted his head. "Margaritas?"

"All the margaritas you can drink. And we can brainstorm a plan for your future."

It was the best, terrible idea. "Let's do it."

Ben didn't even know what time it was. Only that it was dark, the room lit only by the glow of the muted TV and the lights from the kitchen, where the margarita mix lived. They'd decided not to go the frozen route—he hated brain freeze, and with the amount of alcohol he'd need to consume to get drunk, it would have just slowed him down.

He licked the salt off the rim as Didi gestured with her glass. "And then! This is crazy, you're never going to believe it. Then Bob —"

"You said his name was Bill."

"Bob, Bill, what the fuck ever." Oh boy, Didi was drunk if she was dropping the F-bomb that casually. Their mother would have kittens if she heard. Ben giggled at that thought. Kittens.

"So Bob"—she stressed the name, as if by decree she could make him a Bob even if he wasn't—"and fuckin' Marly sneak out of the porta-potty together."

"Ew!" Ben frowned as he tried to place the name. "Oh, wait, Marly? Your dick of a foreman?"

She leaned back, a triumphant smirk on her face, "One and the same. The one who keeps commenting on women needing to be in the kitchen instead of on the work site."

"And they were fucking in a porta-potty?"

"I don't even want to know," Didi said, swinging her glass to the side. A few drops spilled out, but she didn't seem to care. Neither did Ben, for that matter. "Marly's hair was super messed up, though. Like someone had been pulling on it."

"In a porta-potty?" Ben couldn't even get his head around that. He didn't know how big these guys were, but even average-sized human men would have trouble both fitting in one of the tiny closet-like toilets, wouldn't they?

"I know! So gross." Didi scrunched up her nose. "I'm not sure how I'm going to look them in the eye if I have to work with them again."

"Oh, bullshit." Ben chuckled. "You're going to smirk at them and blow bubble gum in their faces while waggling your eyebrows."

She giggled. "You know me so well."

Of course he did. And the same was true of her and him. Him and her? Whatever. She knew him just as well. They were twins, after all. He held out a fist and she bumped it, and then they both made an explosion noise.

"Oh!" Didi bounced with the sudden exclamation, but took a sip of her drink before she continued. "I didn't tell you. Jack—remember Jack?"

"The douchebag pig you dated?"

"He wasn't a pig. He was a boar."

"But a douchebag."

"Yes, definitely a douchebag," she agreed with a raising of her glass. "He finally found his balls and joined FUC like he said he was going to do."

The Furry United Coalition was the organization that protected shifters from bad guys. It didn't matter if the bad guys were humans or other shifters, FUC agents got in the way. At one point, a long time ago, Ben had thought about joining. He had the build and the strength, and was bull-headed enough—ha—to get through almost any situation. But being gay in a paramilitary organization just seemed like a bad idea, even if there were protections in place to guard against harassment. So he'd embraced the side of himself that was more into discussion and empathy and pushed away his tendency to charge into things head first, ramming whatever was in his way.

And look where that got him. Jobless in his prime. Having to start over, learn a brand new company, figure out how to fit in, try to make a place for himself. For however long he had there. Because who was to say he wouldn't get laid off again? And again? HR was one of those departments that always got hit hard by cost-cutting, but Ben had thought himself safe at InnovaTech because of his performance.

But clearly performance meant dick all.

"They recruit him?" he asked.

"Nah. He applied online."

"FUC takes applications online?" That didn't seem very covert, but what did he know?

Didi shrugged. "Why? You interested?"

"Fuck yeah, I'm interested." It was probably the tequila's influence, but he suddenly felt excited. Hopeful. Maybe getting laid off was meant to be. Maybe it was a chance for him to really find himself.

He'd tried indulging the softer side of himself. Maybe it was time to explore the badass bull that lived inside his skin. If anyone had a problem with him being gay, they could find out how *horny* a bison bull could be.

Ben retrieved his laptop from his room while Didi refreshed their drinks. Together, they found the encrypted Furry United Coalition Newbie Academy website—okay, it took a text to Jack to get the URL and listening to Didi bitch about contacting him, but even she admitted it was all for a good cause. Ben lost count of the number of drinks he had while he filled out the questionnaire about his shifter animal, his health status, his work experience, and if he was willing to carry a firearm.

He might have put “hell yes” as the answer to that one. Enthusiasm couldn’t hurt, right?

He woke up with brightness streaming across his eyes, his cheek mashed into something hard and uncomfortable, and Didi shoving at his shoulder.

“Get it,” she whined.

“Get what?” He lifted his head and winced as his skin threatened to stay on whatever surface he’d fallen asleep on. His keyboard? Glancing at the screen, he saw a word processor document full of random letters and numbers. Five pages’ worth.

His head pounded as he tried to make sense of everything, and Didi poking his shoulder again didn’t help.

“Your phone,” she whimpered.

Oh. That was the sound he was hearing. He picked it up. Unknown caller. “Hello?”

“Mr. Beaufort?”

“Yes,” he said cautiously.

“Excellent. This is Kendra from the Furry United Coalition Newbie Academy.”

Ben pulled the phone away from his ear and stared at it for a second before putting it back to his ear. “Jack? Is that you screwing with me?”

The caller on the other end cleared their throat. “My name is not Jack, Mr. Beaufort. I’m Kendra. Sorry, is this a bad time?”

Ben blinked. “Uh, no. No. I’m sorry, I—you’re calling from the academy?”

“FUCN’A.”

It took Ben a second to realize Kendra wasn’t agreeing enthusiastically but using the acronym of the organization. “I, uh, wasn’t expecting a call.”

"We received your application, Mr. Beaufort, and we'd like to schedule a security interview. When can you come in?"

Ben's lips curved into a smile. "Really?"

"Yes, really."

"I can be there anytime."

And that was how Ben Beaufort, bison, was recruited to FUCN'A.

Oliver Zuraw threw open the curtains of his third-floor instructor quarters at the Furry United Coalition Newbie Academy, his arms outstretched to welcome the bright rays of sunshine just starting to stream over the horizon.

“Goooooooood morning!” he sang. He didn’t stop there, though—the beautiful sun deserved a thorough welcome. Even the thumping on the wall next to him couldn’t deter his salutation.

“For the love of god, Oliver,” Noah, the marksmanship instructor, moaned. “One morning without the screeching. Just one. Please.”

Screeching. Pfft. It wasn’t screeching—it was loud musical appreciation, and everyone should be getting up anyway. Sleeping in and getting off-schedule never helped anyone.

“Since you’re up, time for yoga!” Oliver gathered his long blonde hair into a messy bun, laughing at the exaggerated groan that reverberated through the wall. “Come on, you know you want to.”

“I really, really don’t.”

“Noah.” Oliver pulled on his yoga pants and T-shirt. “Didn’t you tell me just last week how enervated yoga at dawn makes you?”

“But—”

“Thanks for dragging me out of bed, Oliver.” Oliver mimicked Noah’s deeper voice. “It really was worth it. You’re amazing, and I should remember that you’re always right.”

“I never said that!”

“Close enough.”

It took some more cajoling, but eventually Noah stumbled out of his room and down to the basement gym with Oliver. It was early, but it was still odd to have the gym completely to themselves. The newest class of cadets would arrive this afternoon, and starting tomorrow, the gym would be crazy busy again. Oliver didn’t mind the noise that came with a crowd of new recruits, just like he didn’t mind the quiet of right now. You couldn’t appreciate one without the other.

He took Noah—poor, not-very-flexible Noah—through a relatively easy series of poses. Once they were done, his friend’s face was rosy and his eyes sparkled, and Oliver smiled at the transformation from barely awake grump to a beaver shifter ready to take on the world.

Or at least the breakfast line in the cafeteria.

He smirked and raised a brow. “So?”

Noah stretched as he got to his feet. “Yeah, yeah.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you.”

“You were right. Asshole,” Noah grumbled, but the smile let Oliver know he wasn’t angry. “Let’s go get a coffee and some breakfast. I’m about to gnaw my arm off.”

They headed up to the cafeteria on the first floor, and Oliver froze at the sight of the mob of people milling about the foyer. The jolt of surprise almost triggered his very literal flight instinct—he had to fight down the urge to let his feathers out and fly away from the startling and unexpected noise.

"Damn, I guess they've moved up the time for the recruits to arrive," Noah muttered.

Each class at FUCN'A was made up of only 18 recruits, but put 18 shifters and some family members into a small space and you got a whole cacophony of noise. Oliver let Noah drag him through the crowd, silently thankful for the other shifter's hand on his elbow that kept him from giving in to the urge to shift and fly. They'd almost made it through the jam of people when someone suddenly stepped in front of Oliver. He stopped quickly and Noah's hand slipped from his elbow.

"Shoot! I'm sorry."

Oliver looked up to make eye contact, which was a rarity. At six-two, he normally towered over everyone, but this man was a behemoth. He was well over six feet tall, and everything about him was broad. Broad face—topped with brown hair no longer than a millimeter or two, and a matching close-cropped beard—broad shoulders, broad chest, tiny waist, broad thighs.

Oliver wondered if his cock was just as broad...

Oh boy. Don't go there. He was done with complicating his life with men. His job was fulfilling enough—and even better, predictable and undemanding. He liked teaching yoga to recruits. He liked being part of their growth. He wouldn't go back to what he used to do for all the fish in the world.

"Hi," the man said with the slightest glimmer of a smile. He held out a hand that was almost as big as Oliver's head. "Ben Beaufort."

Oliver stared stupidly at the meaty palm, wondering if it would be callused and rough, or smooth and gentle, or—

"There you are." Noah grabbed Oliver's elbow and dragged him away from Ben before Oliver could protest. "Let's get out of this sea

of people, okay? I'm getting the urge to gnaw on legs to bring some of them down."

Oliver shook off the thoughts of Ben. "I don't think Director Cooper would appreciate you treating recruits like trees in a forest, Mr. Beaver."

"They shouldn't grow them so tall, then," Noah grumbled. "Come on. Coffee and food. If the recruits are here this early, you know what that means for us?"

Oh. Ugh. "Meet and greets."

"Exactly. I'm not doing those without a ton of caffeine in my system."

For once, Oliver was in complete agreement.

Ben was glad that today was focused solely on orientation. The FUC-N'A facility was huge, but with a guide pointing out what amenities were on which floor, it became clear that it was well organized. That reduced some of his anxiety about getting lost. Really, it was pretty simple: the basement was for working out, with the gym, firearm range and pool; the first floor had the cafeteria and the student rec area; the second floor was for learning, with classrooms and labs; and the third floor was for sleeping. Outside was another rec area and firearm range. The delineation between activities and areas soothed Ben and made it a little easier to breathe.

It didn't hurt that his roommate was a chatterbox and didn't seem to require Ben to say anything.

"Dude, I am *ridiculously* excited." Kellan grinned at the T-shirt he was folding. He was younger than Ben by at least ten years, his face still carrying a hint of baby fat. He had a similar build to Ben's, but

was shorter, so he looked even broader. He was a longhorn cattle shifter, but didn't seem to care he was a cow in a class made up mostly of predators. "This is a dream, man. A real dream."

"You always wanted to join FUC?" Ben tucked away his own clothes, folding them in the Marie Kondo way. That woman was a genius.

"Absolutely! Since I was a calf. My uncle was a FUC agent in Texas and whenever he visited, he had great stories. How about you?"

"Doesn't every shifter kid dream about it?"

Kellan's grin widened. "Yeah. But—don't hate me—this isn't your first rodeo, is it? What'd you do before?"

"Human resources for a tech company."

"With a build like yours? You were a cubicle monkey? Seriously?" Kellan shook his head. "Glad you came to your senses."

"Ha. Yeah."

A call to gather in the auditorium interrupted their unpacking, and Ben and Kellan tromped downstairs with the rest of their class. The auditorium was large, easily able to accommodate their entire class with space left over. Ben stuck close to Kellan, and let him do the talking with the other recruits. He'd always been one to keep his own counsel as he settled into a new place—watching, learning, getting to know what expectations were.

A shrill whistle pierced the air and Ben jerked his eyes back toward the stage. An imposing woman stood there, her hands on her hips as she looked down her nose at the gathered recruits. "Listen up! I'm Irina, your class liaison. I'm going to introduce your instructors, and you're going to sit there quietly, like good little pups and kits...and calves," she added, with a nod at Ben and Kellan. "Got

it?" Her eyes widened at the silence that greeted her question. "I said, got it?"

"Yes ma'am!" the class responded.

"That's better. Okay, first up—Georgie Redding will be your vehicle operations and driving skills instructor."

One by one, the instructors filed out onto stage. Ben was a little surprised at the breadth of skills they were expected to learn. He'd expected the typical cop-like stuff, such as the driving, investigating, threat assessment and firearms skills. But basic lab techniques? Computer science? That went beyond everything he'd anticipated.

And then all thoughts about class work flew out of his brain as *that guy* appeared on stage.

"Oliver Zuraw is a member of our physical fitness team. He specializes in yoga."

Someone behind Ben snorted derisively.

Irina glared into the audience—straight at Ben. Oh shit. "Mr... Beaufort, is it? Do you have a problem with the concept of yoga?"

"I—it—" Ben swallowed. "No, ma'am."

"Glad to hear it. Next up..."

Ben slumped into his chair. From behind him, someone whispered, "Sorry to put you on the spot like that, man. But yoga? Am I right?"

Ben grunted and the dude—whoever he was—moved away. Yeah, yoga wasn't his thing, but that guy—Oliver—kinda was. Except now he probably thought Ben was a douchebag meathead. It was a label that had been attached to him frequently, due to his size and looks. Everyone expected a guy lacking in brains when they saw his muscles and build, and he hated it. It had been something he'd actively worked to change at InnovaTech...and now he was back to square one. Possibly with at least one instructor biased against him.

Wonderful. Just fucking wonderful.

FUCN'A was all about routine. Every morning started with someone screeching at dawn—Ben hadn't thought there was a rooster shifter in the class, but maybe he was wrong. At any rate, it got everyone up for the day in time to hit the gym. They ran, they swam, they lifted weights, and the instructors promised that in the next few weeks, they'd add martial arts instruction to their daily routine.

After breakfast, they had classes. All the classes. Every day it seemed that Ben barely blinked and it was lunchtime, followed by more classes. It was a lot—almost too much, to be honest. But he found himself engaged in a way he'd never experienced in the HR world. He wasn't just using his brain, but all of him...and it felt right.

On the first day of the second week, Ben gathered with the rest of the class on the outdoor obstacle course. The current head physical fitness instructor, Simon Falk, looked at them all as though they were little more than bugs. It had been a difficult thing to get used to, but Ben was finding it easier to shrug off the instructors' attitudes. He knew it wasn't personal—they needed to weed out the recruits that couldn't take criticism and harsh input. The whole paramilitary thing. Ben thought they'd probably get better results with a little

more gentleness, but then, he was coming at it from the civilian corporate world, where glares and harsh words would probably net the person a rebuke in their performance report instead of praise.

"All right, maggots. You see this course behind me? By the end of your tenure at FUCN'A, you'll be expected to complete it in less than two minutes."

Ben couldn't help it—his eyebrows rose. The course was complex and intricate, with all sorts of challenges, from the traditional staggered tires on the ground, to climbing, to...hell, he didn't even know what.

"Two minutes?" Kellan whispered beside him. "Is he kidding?"

Ben was glad he wasn't the only one with doubts.

Falk stared at Kellan for a few seconds, making it clear that he knew he'd been talking out of turn, but didn't say anything. "This is your new nemesis. We're going to attack it weekly until you know every section by heart. Until you fuckin' dream about it. Because out there, in the real world, foot chases are rarely linear, on flat surfaces. Endurance is all well and good, but if you can't adapt to your environment, you're useless to FUC. Understood?"

The recruits had gotten used to responding by now, and let out a chorus of "Yes sir!"

"McKevitt, you're up!"

Angela McKevitt was a lynx shifter, and if anyone could handle this course, Ben figured she could, with her feline agility and all. She didn't seem to have a problem with the tires or the climbing, or even the balancing beam, but by the second round of climbing, it was clear she was out of gas. Falk yelled at her to keep going, but her arms gave out and she let go of the rope to collapse to the ground.

"You hurt, McKevitt?"

"No sir," she shouted back, sounding winded.

“Good. Get off the field. I expect you to complete the course next week.”

Ben shifted nervously from foot to foot. Well, damn. If Angela couldn't complete it, what chance did he have?

“Carter! You're next!”

Ben shot Kellan a sympathetic look as his roommate stepped up to the starting line. Unlike Angela, Kellan barely made it up the first climbing obstacle. It wasn't a graceful ascent by any means. He had to use brute force to lever himself up, and Ben could see his limbs shaking from exertion. But it was the balancing beam that did him in. He took two steps and tumbled to the thick bed of straw beneath it. He lifted a hand and shouted he was okay, and Falk told him to get off the field.

One by one, Ben watched his classmates attempt the course and fail. It was clearly impossible, and it made Ben wonder if this was another sort of test. In all of the classes they'd had so far, instructors had emphasized the idea of working smarter, not harder. Was that something they were expected to apply here? And if so, how?

“Beaufort!”

Ben swallowed as he approached the starting line. *Work smarter, not harder. Smarter, not harder. I can do this.*

“Go!”

Ben bolted off the starting line and embraced his bison self while still in human form. Bison didn't dodge or climb or balance. They were the powerhouse battering rams of the animal world. They charged *through*. There was no point in trying to display agility he didn't possess, not when he could obliterate the obstacles that stood in his way.

Work smarter, not harder.

He kicked the tires out of the way. He lowered his head and ran through the climbing wall, ignoring the gasps and shouts behind him. He used his bison's strength to lift the balancing beam and toss it aside. He ripped the crawling portion's wire out of the way and charged through the next climbing station. At the very end, he grabbed the climbing rope leading up to the bell you were supposed to ring when you finished, and yanked. The bell tumbled to the ground, clanging as it hit the hardened dirt.

Ben turned to find the entire class—and Oliver Zuraw—staring at him in stunned silence.

"What—what the hell was that?" Falk marched across the destroyed course, his face grower redder with every step. "Beaufort, what the *hell* was that?"

Oh shit. "I'm, uh...not very agile. Sir."

"So you decided to wreck the course?"

"No sir. I thought—you know, work smarter."

"Work smarter? Work *smarter*? Do you even know what that means? I'm going to guess you don't, because this was the stupidest goddamned stunt I've ever witnessed in my years as instructor," Falk fumed. "Are you going to smash through brick walls like you're the Kool-Aid Man? Huh? Tear down fire escape ladders? Kick cars out of the way?"

Ben winced. "No?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"No, sir."

"That's right. And do you know why?" Falk continued without waiting for an answer. "Because even if you could, it would give us all away. Instead of protecting shifters, you'd be exposing them. Maybe you need to rethink your presence here, Beaufort."

“Simon, I’ll start him on a yoga routine.” Ben hadn’t noticed, but Oliver had stepped away from the rest of the crowd, easily making his way across the field of debris. “If he was confident in his agility, he wouldn’t have chosen this approach. Right?”

Even though he burned with embarrassment, Ben nodded. “I knew I wouldn’t be able to...you know, so I thought maybe this was a different sort of test...” His explanation didn’t do anything to reduce the redness of Falk’s face, so he let his voice trail off.

“Fine. He’s your responsibility, Zuraw. I don’t want to see him back here until you can assure me he’s not going to destroy my fucking course again.”

“It’s a deal,” Oliver said. He offered Ben a strained smile, and more embarrassment flooded through Ben.

It wasn’t bad enough that he’d made a fool of himself—he’d made one of the instructors feel as though he had to take pity on him and add more to his own plate. An instructor he found incredibly attractive...but was now too damned humiliated to even broach the idea of getting to know him better.

Fuck my life.

Oliver’s salutation to the sun the next morning was more muted than usual. He was totally distracted by the thought that in a few short minutes, he and Ben Beaufort would be alone together in the yoga room. Ben...who was *exactly* the type of guy Oliver would have loved to explore flexibility with, once upon a time. You know, in bed. Or against a wall. Or hell, over a table—he wasn’t picky.

But no. Not anymore. Oliver was done getting involved with guys who were all brawn, even if that body type worked for him—

and boy, did it. He just hoped Ben was focused on the poses and wouldn't notice that yoga pants really didn't hide anything.

Too soon, Oliver was in the yoga room, watching Ben edge past the door. "Good morning," Oliver called across the room.

Ben jerked, as though Oliver's voice surprised him, then gave Oliver a small smile. "Hi. I mean, good morning."

Oliver waved to the mat he'd set out for Ben, and Ben sat down, trying—and failing—to mimic how Oliver sat, with his legs crossed. Oh boy. This might be tougher than Oliver had anticipated.

Ben gave up, his legs not quite tucked together, and cleared his throat. "I, uh, wanted to thank you for doing this. You didn't have to and I appreciate it."

Oliver's smile widened. "You might not be saying that after our class."

Ben glanced down at his legs. "Heh. Yeah. Maybe not."

"I thought your logic was...well, obviously not perfect, but I could see where you were coming from, yesterday."

"Yeah?" There was a hopeful tone to Ben's voice, as though he needed the reassurance that he wasn't crazy. Oliver was happy to provide it.

"Sure. One of the things they want recruits to do is think outside of the box. You did that. I think Simon was more pissed off that you'd wrecked his course, not at your thinking."

"But he was right—I'm not going to be smashing through walls in the real world, or pushing cars out of the way."

"No, but you shouldn't dismiss the creativity you used to solve the problem that faced you. You didn't follow expectations, and that can be a good thing." Oliver clapped his hands, signalling the end of that conversation, and unfolded to his feet. "Let's get started. We'll do the Mountain Pose first."

At first glance, the Mountain Pose didn't seem like much—just standing. But Oliver walked Ben through extending his toes and pressing them into the mat, through imagining a string pulling his spine straight as it extended up through his head, and so on. When he felt that Ben had gotten himself good and grounded, he moved on to Downward Facing Dog, which was a little more difficult for Ben to achieve.

"Can you feel how this pose stretches your spine?"

"It's stretching something," Ben grunted.

Triangle Pose.

Oliver squinted at Ben's spread legs. "A little wider."

"This is as wide as they go."

"You can do a little wider."

Ben huffed, but shifted his feet out a bit more, his arms straight out to either side. "There."

It wasn't quite one leg's-length, but Ben's legs were just as long as the rest of him, so Oliver gave it a pass. "Now turn your right foot ninety degrees...lean over that leg..." He winced inwardly at the very awkward, very not-flexible picture Ben was painting right now. His face was red from exertion, his stubbly scalp damp from sweat, and the Leaning Tower of Pisa leaned further than he did.

"How'm I doing?" Ben panted. Oliver hesitated an instant too long and Ben's expression fell. "That good, huh?"

"It's your first class."

Ben straightened and wiped a forearm over his brow. "I don't even know what I'm doing here," he muttered.

Oliver eyed his student, then gave a decisive nod. More yoga wasn't what the doctor ordered today. "Come on, walk with me."

He led Ben outside to the walking track. The sun was barely up, and mist gathered here and there along the ground. The scent of the pine trees at the edge of the FUCN'A compound had become a fragrance that meant home and safety to Oliver—two things he'd once wondered if he'd ever find.

"I don't need a pep talk," Ben said after they'd been walking for a few minutes. "I called my sister last night, and she gave me one. This is all just...so different."

"Second career?" Oliver guessed.

"I was in HR before. Got laid off."

Oliver almost exclaimed his disbelief—with a body like that, he was in HR?—but restrained himself. "Going from HR to FUC...that's a big leap."

"So I'm discovering." Ben shot Oliver a quick grin. "But I really do like it. I think I can make a difference with FUC, you know? It's just tough, coming up against obstacles I didn't anticipate."

"No pun intended."

Ben laughed, and Oliver's stomach sank. Oh no. Ben had an awesome laugh—low and deep and rumbley, as though he was letting out

emotions he felt in the core of his being. It tugged at Oliver, wanting him to give in, to smile or laugh in return, and that was just *bad*.

He cleared his throat. "So, uh, the other courses?"

"Are they giving me trouble? No. Actually, I think I'm doing really well in all of them. And never in a million years did I think that physical fitness would be the skill set giving me issues." He cast Oliver a sidelong glance, opened his mouth, closed it, and finally burst out, "How the hell are you so flexible?"

"You sound like you're accusing me of something."

"I—I'm not. It's just...*how*?"

"I'm a whooping crane."

"A what?"

"A whooping crane. It's a bird."

"I know a crane is a bird, but the only *whooping* I know is whooping cough."

Oliver squinted. "Funny. I've never heard that before."

Ben had the grace to look embarrassed. "Sorry."

Oliver sighed and peeled off his shirt. "Here. Hold this."

"I—what the—" Ben sputtered but let Oliver drape his shirt over his outstretched hand. His eyes widened as Oliver stripped off his pants next. "Uh, seriously, you don't have to—"

Oliver tossed his underwear at Ben, and shifted.

It felt good to be in his feathers again. Despite working for FUC, he didn't get enough chances to stretch his wings. They wanted him for his human knowledge and flexibility, after all. He used his long, sharp beak to reposition a couple of his flight feathers, surreptitiously looking at Ben to gauge his reaction.

"You're...tall." Ben blinked. "Like, really tall."

If Oliver had his human lips, he'd tell Ben that whooping cranes were the tallest birds in North America, thank you very much. He

arched his neck and let out a bugle.

Ben winced. "Holy shit, and *loud*."

Oliver fluffed up his feathers with pride. Yes, yes he was. He shifted back to his human form and grinned as Ben shoved his clothes at him. "So there. Now you know what a whooping crane is. Don't forget."

"Right. Okay, sure. I won't. Uh...yeah." He coughed. "So, my classes."

Oliver chuckled softly to himself as he pulled on his pants. Typically in a shifter show-and-tell, there was some reciprocation...but asking Ben to shift might make the poor guy even redder in the face than he currently was. "I'm glad you're doing well."

"Yeah. Thanks. I think I'm enjoying the investigative skills one the most. It's analytical thinking—which I did all the time in my HR role. Trying to determine why a specific department was seeing turnover, trying out methods to retain employees, and so on. Now it's taking those problem-solving skills and putting them up against new puzzles. It's awesome."

Awesome. Right. Just like finding out that despite his brawn, Ben was nothing like the assholes Oliver had been attracted to in the past.

Wait. No. That wasn't awesome. That was *scary*.

Ben was still looking away from Oliver, even though Oliver had finished dressing. "I'm especially looking forward to the undercover training. Nervous about it, but looking forward to it. That will be completely new, pretending to be someone else, but I think I can do it. I feel like I can." Ben broke off, his cheeks still pink but not as fluorescently so as they'd been a few moments before. "And, uh, how about you?"

"My favorite class is yoga."

Ben laughed and finally looked back at Oliver, and this time Oliver couldn't resist smiling. Finding ways to make that happy sound burst out of Ben could be a fun pastime.

Oh boy, he was in trouble.

"No, I mean, did you always want to work for FUC?"

"Honestly, it had never occurred to me until about a year or so ago. This is my second career choice too."

"Really? I mean—no offense—but you can't be older than twenty-five."

Oliver shot him a brilliant grin. "I'm twenty-eight, actually, so thank you."

Ben blushed some more, and Oliver decided that could be a fun game too.

Yep. Definitely in trouble.

Looking back at the track, Oliver continued. "I was a dancer."

"Like, ballet?"

"Exotic. My specialty was the pole."

Ben seemed to choke on nothing. "O-oh."

"It's not a secret," Oliver assured him. "The administration knows—hell, they know everything about everyone who comes through the front doors. Anyway, I was doing some yoga instruction on the side for a friend, then some stuff happened at work, and I decided to make a career change. Another friend suggested FUC was looking for diversification in its physical fitness classes...and here I am."

There was a lot he'd left out, and Ben seemed to know it, but he didn't pry. "You weren't worried about discrimination?"

"What, because of what I used to do, or because I'm gay?"

"Both?"

"No one cares. Wait—okay, that's not a hundred percent true. The people who matter don't care. Sometimes students come through who have opinions, and there have been a couple of comments from instructors, ones who aren't here anymore. For the most part, it's a non-issue. I do my job and I do it well, and that's what counts."

"Huh."

"It doesn't hurt that I've taken a number of the courses here, when they're open to having a non-student sit in. So I know how to kick ass and take names."

"Oh." Ben's eyes took on a mischievous glint. "So you're a whooping-ass crane."

Oliver snorted out a surprised laugh. "Yeah. I guess I am."

They walked in silence for a while, but it was a comfortable quiet. Oliver got the sense that Ben appreciated the hush of the early morning outdoors just as much as he did.

"I'm gay too," Ben said quietly.

"I'd already guessed that," Oliver said. "I don't think anyone else has—I just have very good gaydar."

"I'm not really in the closet or anything. I was out at my last job. Just, here...I wasn't sure."

"With a bod like yours, I don't think you have anything to worry about." Shit, did he say that out loud?

Ben smiled. "Thank you."

"Yeah, uh." Oliver cleared his throat. "You're welcome. So...tomorrow? Same time, same place?"

"You got it."

Ben had never thought he'd enjoy getting up before dawn to do yoga, of all things, but it quickly became the best part of his day. Okay, maybe not the yoga itself, but spending time with Oliver. The other man was patient and dedicated to his goal of making Ben more bendy, and during their after-class walk—which had become a thing—he showed he was witty, kind, and very smart. If he was being honest, it was those conversations that Ben looked forward to most...but admitting that seemed a little less than professional.

After two weeks, they'd settled into something of a routine. Yoga, walk, breakfast in the cafeteria. Ben's flexibility and agility were slowly getting better, but his body just wasn't built for delicate or intricate moves. The obstacle course was almost reconstructed and the hourglass was counting down until he'd have to tackle it again—traditionally this time. Deep down, he knew he wasn't ready. He wasn't improving quickly enough. He hadn't shared his worries with Oliver, but he didn't have to. Oliver seemed to already know he was concerned.

But they were done with the deep talking today. Oliver needed to run by his room before breakfast to check his phone—he was expecting a text from someone named Jinx, whoever that was—and Ben

decided going with him was better than sitting awkwardly at a table by himself. Good thing he did, because he was the one to notice Oliver's door stood ajar.

He grabbed Oliver's arm. "Wait. Did you leave your door open?"

"No." Oliver's voice was firm and definitive, no confusion there.

"Wait here."

Oliver huffed. "Ben—"

Ben wasn't interested in Oliver's protests. His inner bull might be a herd animal and not a predator, but he protected his own. And somewhere along the way, Oliver had become one of his.

Not something he had time to contemplate right now.

He pushed the door open gently. It made no noise as it swung open, revealing a dorm room not much bigger than Ben's, but clearly intended for only one occupant. It had a queen-sized bed and a desk, plus a mini-fridge. And a cabinet, which Ben could hardly see due to the figure kneeling in front of it.

"What the hell are you doing?" he bellowed.

The figure jolted upward and...things flew out of an open can. It took Ben a second to identify the projectiles as nuts. The guy was raiding Oliver's nuts?

"I—I—" The guy's eyes widened and he looked at something behind Ben. "S-sorry, Oliver, but I ran out and I remember that you had —"

Ben ignored the fact that Oliver had entered the room against Ben's specific orders. "Did you seriously break into his room to steal his nuts?"

"They're good nuts! Nice and salty and—what?"

Oliver snorted from behind Ben. "Nothing, nothing. Go on, Jeremy."

"I knew you had a stash and I—I couldn't help myself."

"Bullshit," Ben growled.

"He's a squirrel," Oliver said.

"I don't care. No one has the right to steal your nuts, Oliver!"

Oliver pressed his lips together and nodded, shaking a little. Poor guy.

Ben marched forward and wrenched the can from Jeremy's grip. One last cashew, or maybe it was an almond, went flying. "Get out of here. No more nut stealing."

"Yes, right, of course." He darted a glance at Oliver. "Sorry."

Oliver smiled at him, far kinder than Ben would have been to find out someone had broken into his room for *nuts*. "Just ask next time, okay?"

Ben followed Jeremy to the door and into the hallway, his instincts demanding he see the threat away from his...well, his herd. The hallway was full of teachers and students, and Ben glared at all of them. "Did you hear that?" he demanded, holding the can aloft. "Oliver's nuts are off-limits. Got it?"

His declaration was met with snickers and solemn nods. Point made, he turned back to Oliver to find him redfaced, with tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Are you okay? Did something happen?"

Oliver hiccuped and brushed a hand over his eyes. "You mean, other than you declaring that my nuts are off-limits?" He snorted. Ben realized he was laughing.

And then it hit him what he'd said. "Oh shit."

"'Oh shit,' he says," Oliver whined through his tears.

Ben spun on his heel and poked his head out into the hallway again. The crowd hadn't dispersed much, too caught up in their laughter. "Not *those* nuts," he amended. "I meant *these* nuts!" He shook the can, but there was nothing left in it to make a sound.

"Oh my god, Ben," Oliver wheezed.

"Ahem."

The throat-clearing dragged his attention away from the rest of the observers to focus on... Oh, crap. The Director. Alyce Cooper. Ben had only seen her once, but she wasn't the sort of person you forgot. Tall—almost six feet—with dark brown skin, straight black hair, and a "don't mess with me" attitude that was right in line with her inner llama. Her purple power suit turned her willowy form into a work of art.

Ben swept the empty can of nuts behind his back. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Ben Beaufort, correct?"

He swallowed. "Y-yes, ma'am."

Director Cooper peered around her shoulder to look into Oliver's quarters. "Mr. Zuraw? I'd like a word with you and Mr. Beaufort. In my office, if you don't mind."

"No, ma'am. I mean, yes. Of course." Oliver's voice had none of the laughter left in it, and all of the trepidation Ben felt.

Getting called into what amount to the principal's office couldn't be good.

All the way to the director's office, Oliver wracked his brain about what the purpose of the meeting could be. Fraternizing with a student? Except they hadn't been. Not really. Oliver could see Ben becoming a friend—he was well on the way there already—but there hadn't been anything inappropriate between them.

Not that he hadn't thought about it.

Okay, fantasized about it regularly. Nightly. Maybe hourly. But it wasn't as though anyone could see into his brain or understand why

he needed to adjust himself more frequently than the average male shifter at the academy. That was private. He hadn't acted on anything, and that was what counted. Right?

By the time he and Ben took a seat in the office, across from the imposing Alyce Cooper, Oliver's hands were sweaty and he could feel feathers wanting to pop out across his skin. Ben, who was normally quiet and stoic, both verbally and physically, seemed unable to sit still.

God, they were both acting like they'd gotten caught smoking in the boys' bathroom or something.

"Thank you both for joining me on such short notice," Alyce said with a smile as she settled behind her desk. Her office illustrated her power perfectly, with its innate put-togetherness. Nothing out of place, everything neat and tidy, and furniture designed to make a statement. Right now, Oliver was imagining that statement to be, *You fucked up*.

"I can explain what I was doing in Oliver—uh, Mr. Zuraw's quarters, ma'am," Ben said, his knee bouncing.

She raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Yes. He's been tutoring me in yoga."

"I am aware."

"Oh. Okay, good. He's also been something of a—a mentor, as well."

"A yoga mentor?"

"No. Well, yes. But no." Ben rolled his eyes, and Oliver knew he was exasperated with himself. "Coming to the academy has been a big adjustment for me."

"A big adjustment for the academy as well, according to Mr. Falk." Her lips quirked, just enough to indicate that her dry statement passed for humor.

"Er...yes. Sorry about that." The blush that colored Ben's cheeks was adorable.

No, wait. Not adorable. Shit.

"So, um, Oliver—Mr. Zuraw—has been instrumental in helping me settle in and focus on my classes. Our talks every morning get me prepared for the day and I just...really appreciate his time."

"Your daily talks—and developing relationship—are exactly why we're here," she said.

Developing relationship? There wasn't. Unless...the walks. He should never have instituted their walks. Damn it. He'd known it was overstepping—he was supposed to be the yoga instructor, for god's sake, not a poor excuse for a counselor. And now he'd gone and gotten them both into trouble, because someone had probably seen them and jumped to conclusions and... Crap.

"Ma'am—" Oliver started.

Alyce raised her hand. "I think I should perhaps speak now."

Oliver pressed his lips together and subsided.

"You were asked to tutor Mr. Beaufort in yoga and flexibility. By all reports I've received, you've been doing so, but your interactions have progressed beyond that."

"I—"

"That was not a question, Mr. Zuraw." Alyce pressed her fingertips together. "Mr. Beaufort, your marks in all of your classes—with the exception of physical fitness—have been outstanding. All of your instructors have nothing but excellent things to say about you, which bodes well for your future career."

"I...uh, thank you." The bouncing of Ben's knee slowed considerably.

"Yes. The two of you will do nicely." Alyce sat back with a satisfied smile and retrieved a folder from one of the drawers of her desk.

“Gentlemen, I have a job for you.”

The thumping bass reverberated past the club's doors, growing louder every time the door opened to let someone in or out. Ben didn't recognize the music, but he supposed that wasn't the point—all it needed was a beat. He paid his cover and stepped into the cacophony.

The club was an assault on all of his senses. Beyond the music, there were flashing lights, white, red, green, yellow blue, strobing across the stage and into the audience. He narrowed his eyes to filter out the worst of it. The air throbbed with scents—alcohol and sweat, but arousal, too. It took everything in him not to wrinkle his nose.

This was *not* his scene. But it had been Barrett DuBois's, and for a few hours, that's who Ben was.

When the Director had proposed her plan, Ben had thought Oliver was going to have a stroke. He'd protested—politely but firmly—and had been just as firmly overruled. FUC was in a bind and they needed help. A criminal informant who was supposed to make contact with an up-and-coming mob boss had overdosed and died, leaving FUC in the lurch. They needed the in with the boss so they could set up an undercover agent later. The catch? The CI had been a bison shifter, and finding a stand-in from the active FUC members was all

but impossible. Until someone realized they had a bison bull in training at the academy.

So here he was, pretending to be a small-time but especially trustworthy drug mule looking for work from this new criminal on the scene. Over the past two days, he'd gotten a crash course in undercover work, a rundown on what he needed to do, and the assurance he wouldn't be alone in the club. He looked around surreptitiously for his backup, but everyone was focused on the stage and the dancer performing. Ben glanced that way...and nearly swallowed his tongue.

The dancer was *Oliver*. Totally glammed up and almost unrecognizable, but definitely Oliver. Ben had spent enough time watching his yoga instructor's body over the past few weeks to spot it even under all of the glittery paint, heavy makeup, loose, long hair, and, uh, lack of clothes.

He felt a throb low in his gut that had nothing to do with the overpowering music as Oliver gyrated around the pole near the front of the stage, smiling coyly at the audience and pulling at the straps of his g-string. A few men held out bills and Oliver crawled toward them so they could tuck them under the elastic. The round globes of his ass glittered, sparkling under the strobe lights, and Ben suddenly wanted to *bite* one of them.

"Hey!" Ben jerked his gaze away from the stage as someone shouted in his ear. It was a shorter man, wearing a cheap suit and no tie, with a lowball glass in his hand. "You DuBois?"

Ben got his brain back in the game instead of being focused on the blood rushing south. "Yeah. That's me."

"Figured. Fucking bison are always built like fucking linebackers. I'm Regan." He gestured with the glass at a table set back from the stage, amber liquid sloshing. "We're back here."

Ben let himself be led to the table, where another three men waited. They all stood as he approached. Two were clearly muscle—about as tall as Ben and with his broad “linebacker” build. The third wore a suit that made Regan’s look like a rumpled sweatpants outfit. The dark material, maybe blue, maybe black—it was tough to tell in the dim lighting—fit the man like a glove. He had dark hair, slicked back, and a tidy mustache and goatee. His dark eyes glimmered, and from his utter stillness as he observed Ben, Ben would guess he was a reptile shifter of some type—probably a snake.

Fitting.

Ben stuck out his hand. The guards tensed, but quickly relented when they saw that it was empty. “Barrett DuBois.”

The man clasped it. “Frediano Paul. Good to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

“Have a seat, Mr. DuBois. Or can I call you Barrett?”

Ben settled into one of the chairs around the table as the other men did the same. “Sure.”

“Would you like something to drink?”

“Whiskey on the rocks.”

Paul jerked his chin at Regan, who got up to saunter over to the bar. Then he nodded at the stage. “He’s good, isn’t he?”

Ben grunted noncommittally, even though he wanted to shout *Yes!* at the top of his lungs. “He knows how to work a pole.” He bit back a groan as he realized what he said.

Paul laughed. “I’m sure he does, I’m sure he does.”

“Kind of odd to have a meeting in a joint like this, isn’t it?”

Paul toyed with his glass, the perfect illustration of ease. “Some people might think so, but I’m an equal opportunity player. Having chats in such an environment does two things—it keeps heterosexual

men's eyes where they should be, and it shows me the kind of person they are."

"Okay, sure. I can see that." Ben settled back too as Regan returned with his drink, and accepted it with a nod. "If they got a problem with a place like this, you don't want to work with them."

"Exactly."

Ben took the opportunity to look back at the stage and openly ogle Oliver for a few seconds. Oliver couldn't possibly see him past the bright stage lights, but it almost felt as though he was watching Ben. Waiting for him to look in his direction.

Had to be his imagination.

Managing not to drool, Ben turned around and raised his glass in a toast. "I've got no problem."

"Good man, good man." Paul tapped his glass against Ben's and they both drank.

They spent the next hour chatting about nothing of importance—and yet, Ben knew that every answer he gave, every question he posed, was of the utmost importance in Paul's eyes. He wouldn't kid himself—he was being scrutinized, evaluated and measured. It was an hour-long job interview for a person he was pretending to be.

Hey. Not stressful at all.

Ben was nearly done his drink and dreading ordering another—he wasn't a big drinker—when Paul downed the last of his and looked at him with a serious gleam in his eye. "You seem like a straight arrow, Barrett."

Behind Ben, a cheer rose up, but he knew now was not the time to be distracted. "I try. Games are for kids."

"I hear that. You know what I'm looking for, yes?"

"Someone trustworthy."

"And discreet. I need—"

Paul broke off as Oliver sashayed into view, wearing a little more than he had on stage, but not enough to fully hide his magnificent body. For an instant, Ben forgot everything he was supposed to be doing as Oliver flipped his hair over his shoulder and pouted seductively at the guards sitting on the other side of the table. They each gave a single shake of their heads, their attention not diverted at all, and Regan made a dismissive motion with his hand to get Oliver to move on.

He did. Right to Ben.

"Hey, baby." Oliver slinked—that was the only word—onto Ben's lap and leaned close. "Interested in joining me in the champagne room?" He swooped closer to Ben's ear. "You okay?" he whispered.

Ben grunted in what he hoped was an affirmative tone. "We're kind of busy," he said out loud.

"Too busy for me?"

"Can I take a rain check?"

Oliver swept his hands over Ben's biceps and abs. Ben sucked in a breath and willed his dick not to respond.

His dick ignored him.

"Sweetheart, as much as I love the show you're giving us right now, we're in the middle of business. But come see me later, eh?" Paul adjusted his crotch and licked his lower lip.

And Ben saw red. Before he realized what he was doing, he was up and out of his chair, Oliver somehow behind him, with his nostrils flared, his brows lowered, and one foot digging into the cheap carpeting as though he were a bull about to charge. Because he was.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Paul held up his hands in surrender, even as his two goons leaped to their feet.

Through the red haze clouding his vision, Ben still understood that Paul hadn't actually surrendered and was still a threat to both

him and his...and his...

And his Oliver.

Well. Now was a hell of a time to realize *that*.

Paul chuckled and shook his head at Ben's display of dominance. "You can't get possessive over any of these dancers, Barrett. They'll give it up for anyone with the right amount of cash. Right, Ricky?"

This was bad. This was so bad. The exact thing that the Director had hoped would be a strength—their budding relationship, whatever the hell it was—had turned out to be their weakness. He didn't know what Ben would do if he agreed with Paul's statement, but it probably wouldn't be anything that would save their cover. And then this opportunity to set up an in for an agent down the road would be gone, never to be recovered.

Only one thing to be done.

"Babe. Sweetie." Oliver rubbed Ben's arm and tried not to drool at the absolute heft of it. Good god, did the man bench press trucks? "This is why meeting where I work is never a good idea."

That jerked Ben out of his rage. He looked at Oliver—and Oliver thrilled a little, again, at the fact that Ben had to look down just a bit. Ben's gaze was puzzled at first, but Oliver didn't waver and after a second, realization dawned in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, honey." The endearment tripped off Ben's lips so naturally, Oliver could almost think he meant it. "I'd forgotten you were

on tonight. I thought it was movie night with your sister."

"No, I switched shifts. I told you about it, remember?"

Ben closed his eyes, as if remembering a conversation that didn't exist. "Right, right. Shit. I screwed up."

Paul cleared his throat. "So you two...know each other?"

Ben turned back to him. "Yeah, sorry. We're married."

Oliver hid a jerk behind a wide, fake smile. *Way to go for broke, Ben.*

"Married?" Paul's brows rose. "Well, damn. I never would have thought—huh."

"It's new," Oliver put in.

"'Bout a month now." Ben caught Oliver's hand in his and brought it to his lips. "Best month of my life so far."

Oliver didn't have to fake the blush. He glanced at Paul and was shocked to see the man looking at them with a soft expression.

"You're lucky." Paul waved for Ben to have a seat again, and one of his minions pulled out a chair for Oliver. Oliver ignored it in favor of sitting on Ben's lap.

Because why not.

"So you're not just looking for a one-off job, then," Paul surmised.

Oliver squeezed Ben's fingers, hoping the recruit realized the opportunity for what it was.

"Well." Ben cleared his throat. "Something more stable would be ideal, of course, but I'll take what I can get."

Oliver cooed. "Oh, if you got something that was regular, I could cut back my hours here. That would be excellent."

"Yeah, it would," Ben agreed.

"You don't like him working here?"

Ben shook his head at Paul's question. "Would you?"

"No. No, I would not." Paul sat back, his fingers steepled in front of his lips, his gaze intent on the two of them—but not as cold and threatening as it had been earlier. After a moment, he seemed to come to a decision and nodded. "I like you, Barrett."

Ben managed not to look at Oliver for a clue as to what he thought Paul was getting at. "Thank you."

"I like to help out the people I like," Paul continued. "So I'm going to give you an opportunity I don't hand out lightly. You want something more stable than running errands for me?"

Errands meaning drugs. That's what the plan had been—get an in through a low-level position. "Depends on what it is."

Paul grinned. "Smart man. Always best to look before you leap. I'm looking to expand my markets, and that means I'll need to expand my security team. You'd come with me to meetings, maybe act as driver occasionally, maybe some other tasks related to the role. Best part, you get room and board at my place in the mountains. A suite that's probably bigger than anything you can afford now. For free."

Holy shit. *Holy shit*. This was gold. Oliver let out a squeal that wasn't completely faked. "And pay? He'd get paid on the regular?"

"Absolutely. Let's start at fifty k a year."

"Oh my god!" Oliver shifted on Ben's lap and grabbed his shirt. "Honey, we could get that truck you wanted! And I could update my wardrobe!"

"Ricky would be able to stay with me?" Ben asked.

"Of course, of course. I'm not interested in splitting you up. I think the house could use someone like him. All that energy." The look he shot Oliver was almost a leer.

Oh yeah, definitely an ulterior motive to this offer. But Oliver didn't care—it meant they'd have the access they had been trying to

set up for the agent that came after them. If they could get in, gather enough dirt on Paul to end his organization...

Oliver tamped down the excitement at the opportunity. He had to remember that neither of them were actual agents. Even if Ben was doing great at undercover work (minus the possessiveness), and even if Oliver had taken some classes here and there over the past couple of years. This could go bad very easily. Too easily.

He took a breath. But it was too good to pass up.

"Oh babe, can we? Please?" He leaned in, resting his temple on Ben's shoulder and pressing cajoling kisses along his jaw line. He didn't miss how Ben's breath caught—and he also didn't miss how he smelled like fresh prairie grasses and rich, earthy soil.

"Yeah." Ben's voice came out gruff, as though he was overwhelmed by the possibility of a new, struggle-free life, and he cleared his throat. "Yeah. I think that would be a great deal."

As Ben shook Paul's hand, Oliver just hoped they hadn't made a huge mistake.

After promising to be at Paul's place later that evening, Ben and Oliver headed "home" to the apartment FUC had set up as part of Ben's cover, in case Paul had him followed or checked out. Ben didn't say anything to Oliver as they trudged up the stairs, and Oliver was just as quiet. He wondered if Oliver's brain was as full of *oh my god, what the fuck did we just do?* as Ben's was.

He slid the unfamiliar key into the unfamiliar lock, ushered Oliver inside, closed the door behind them, flipped on the living room light—and let out a bellow as he spotted the dark figure sitting on the couch.

The director.

"Jesus Christ," Ben breathed. "A little warning would be good."

Alyce Cooper ignored him and remained seated, as though she owned the place—which, er, she sort of did. Her eyes glittered. "Gentlemen, this was supposed to be an easy, in-and-out mission."

Ben raked a hand over the barely there stubble on his head. "I know. I fucked up. I didn't—"

"Ma'am, with all due respect," Oliver interrupted. "This is a fantastic opportunity."

She arched a brow. "How so, Mr. Zuraw?"

Oliver fidgeted with the hem of the hoodie he'd pulled on over his skimpy T-shirt. "The goal was to set up a relationship with Paul that FUC could make use of later, right? Well, we've got that chance now."

"And you expect me to send in a raw recruit and a civilian instructor undercover?"

"Didn't you already?"

For an instant, Ben wondered if Oliver's subtle challenge was going to get him fired. Alyce Cooper looked mad enough to spit. But then her lips curved gently and some of the fire leaked away from her expression. "Touché, Mr. Zuraw. Touché." She eyed Ben for a moment. "I'll make this simple. Do you like Mr. Zuraw?"

"Like him...as in, *like* like him?" Ben blushed.

"Yes. *Like* like."

He'd fallen through a portal somewhere, into some dimension where the Director of FUCN'A took the place of a scribbled note passed between classmates. *Do you like me? Circle Y or N.*

"Uh...yes? Is that the right answer?"

"If it's the truth."

"Then yes. I do like him. *Like* like," he clarified.

“And Mr. Zuraw?”

Ben looked at Oliver to find him with the same dumbfounded expression that must be on his own face. “Yes. Like like.”

Ben’s eyes widened. “You do?”

“Yeah,” Oliver said, a smile slowly growing. “I do.”

Ben couldn’t help an answering smile.

“Excellent.” Director Cooper rose gracefully from the couch and smoothed the wrinkles in her pantsuit. “I think you might just be able to pull this off, gentlemen. We’ll be nearby, ready to move if needed. We’ll make sure to get an emergency phone to you once you’re inside the compound.”

“Why not just give us one now?” Ben asked.

“In case we get searched,” Oliver explained.

Oh. Made sense.

“You have two days to get as much information about Paul’s business as you can,” Alyce said, and held up her hand as Oliver opened his mouth, presumably to argue. “You’re right, this is a good opportunity—an excellent one, even—and if you were seasoned agents, there would be no concerns about making this a long-term mission. But you’re not, and I can’t in good conscience leave you undercover for a lengthy amount of time. So two days.”

“Understood,” Ben said with a nod.

After a few seconds, Oliver nodded too. “Got it.”

“Good.” The director reached the door and turned around, her expression softening a nearly imperceptible amount as she regarded them. “Be careful. If the situation seems to be going south, get out. We’re all taking a huge risk in allowing this mission to continue. You two most of all.”

“We won’t let you down,” Oliver said.

Ben hoped that was the truth.

When Paul had said “place in the mountains,” Ben had envisioned a fortress on a cliff. So sue him. He was thinking evil mastermind plus mountains plus...well, maybe he’d watched too many superhero movies over the years.

At any rate, it didn’t quite live up to Ben’s imagination, but it was still impressive. It was actually in the foothills, not the mountains, and it was more of a ranch than a fortress. The house was made of field stone and lumber, with warm lights tucked into the eaves to highlight the rugged exterior. The driveway curled around a fountain installed in the center. In the background, Ben spotted a few outbuildings, but he couldn’t tell what they were, exactly. At least one of them was big enough to be a barn, though. Did Paul have horses?

Would horses let a snake like Paul ride?

Inside, Paul gave them a ten-cent tour consisting of the kitchen, the living room, and the entertainment room, complete with movie-theater-style seating. Oliver oohed and ahed at everything, and Ben let himself enjoy his enthusiasm, even if it was probably 80 percent faked. It was fun seeing Oliver like this, so excited and seemingly open with his joy.

He’d really like to see this side of Oliver again. When it was real.

Eventually Paul showed them to their suite, which, as he’d promised, was bigger than a lot of one-bedroom apartments. After letting them know the kitchen and everything else was open to them 24 hours a day, Paul left them alone.

As soon as the door closed, Ben let his shoulders droop. “Holy shit.”

Oliver put a finger to his lips and shook his head. Ben frowned, but quickly clued in. "Bugs?" he mouthed.

Oliver shrugged. "C'mon, baby, let's have a shower," he said with a seductive lilt to his voice.

Ben nodded and followed Oliver into the bathroom. The *enormous* bathroom. "Damn. You could have a ballroom dance in here."

Oliver giggled, completely in character, and turned on the two rainfall showerheads in the massive, tiled shower stall. "There," he said, pitched just above a whisper.

"Bugs? Really?" Ben hissed, all traces of the Barrett character gone. He'd held it together through the impromptu meeting with Alyce Cooper and Paul's tour, but he couldn't subdue his nerves any longer. "What the *hell* are we doing?"

"What we have to."

"We're not...you know!" He didn't want to say anything incriminating, even with the water likely drowning out anything they said.

"No, we're not. But we're here and F—our family is trusting us to do what we believe in. That's got to count for something, right?"

Ben snorted. "Oh sure. It's a count against our intelligence."

"Barrett..."

Damn it, he hated that name on Oliver's lips. He should be saying Ben, and only Ben. "I'm serious. We've got the opportunity, but not the skills. What are we thinking? What is—*she*—thinking?"

It wasn't until Oliver's fingers touched his lips that Ben realized he'd shouted the last. "It'll be okay."

Ben made an inquisitive grunt.

"Because you are a kickass...person." Oliver mouthed, "Agent," and Ben wanted to protest...but he also didn't want to lose Oliver's touch. "We'll do what we need to do, then get out. Remember, the family knows where we are. They're watching out for us."

The director had said the same—that they'd be nearby—but for some reason Oliver's words were way more comforting. "You think so?" It came out more like "Youf fink tho?" because of Oliver's fingers, but Oliver understood.

"I know so." He offered Ben a gentle smile. "C'mon, let's get some sleep."

They each took a turn under the shower to give their cover story some weight, and *damn*, but it took all of Ben's willpower not to ogle Oliver's long, lean body. He didn't catch more than a glance through the foggy glass, but it was enough to get his dick interested in making friends. He shucked off his clothes and thought about getting caught until his dick gave up and disappeared.

Well, not disappeared. Bison shifters were big *all* over.

By the time they stepped out of the steamy bathroom into the suite proper, Ben was ready to crash. Maybe if he closed his eyes and went to sleep, he'd forget about the temptation that was Oliver Zuraw.

Scratching on the window and angry chittering interrupted Ben's fantasies about sleeping. Oliver went over to the window and opened it, and a second later, a gray squirrel jumped through. A gray squirrel wearing a harness that held a cellphone and...something else.

Oliver unstrapped the harness as though it were something he did every day. As soon as the squirrel was free, he shifted—into Jeremy. The salty nut stealer. He held up a finger to his lips and gestured to the second device.

Oh, Ben knew what that was. A bug sweeper. Oliver tossed it over to him and he obediently swept it around the room to find out if their suspicion about bugs was justified. As it turns out, it wasn't.

"Good." Jeremy kept his voice low and grabbed at the blanket from the end of the bed to draped around himself. He looked at Oliver, then at Ben, and snorted. "Damn, she was right."

"What?" Oliver glanced at Ben with an expression he couldn't quite interpret.

But apparently Jeremy could. "Oh my god, you've got it bad."

They both looked at the squirrel. "Hm?" they said, almost in unison.

"Yeah, whatever. You're not going to need a stash of salty nuts anymore," Jeremy muttered.

Ben squinted. "Is there a reason you're here, other than the cellphone?"

"Yeah. The director has some directions for you. Imagine that—a director directing."

"Jeremy..." There was no ignoring the note of warning in Oliver's low voice.

"Okay, okay. In your conversation with him, Paul mentioned expanding. Find out what his new market is. And don't get dead. And remember, you've got two days. *And...* don't get dead. That's really important, okay?"

Before Oliver could say anything else, Jeremy shifted back into his squirrel form, and jumped out the window.

That was one way to end a conversation. Ben was just happy to see Jeremy gone, though—he was tired enough to fall asleep standing.

"Oh no." Oliver's quiet lamentation sounded loud in the room.

"What?"

Oliver gestured at the bed.

Ben looked at Oliver, then at the bed, and then back at Oliver. "It's a bed."

Oliver widened his eyes and gestured more emphatically at the bed.

What? It was big and comfy looking, with a fluffy burgundy duvet and plump, inviting pillows that were just begging for Ben to lay down.

Ben widened his own eyes and gave a “yeah, so?” shrug.

Oliver sighed. “How many beds do you see?”

Oh. *Oh*.

There was only one bed.

And they were supposed to be married.

“All I want to do is crash. I promise.”

It was the right thing to do. The honorable thing. But Ben had a split second where he wished he could take advantage of a situation without worrying about the consequences. Because this might be the only chance he ever had to make a move on Oliver...and he couldn't.

It was his turn to sigh, and he stepped back. “Let's go to bed.”

Did he imagine it, or was that a flicker of disappointment in Oliver's eyes?

Oliver woke up absolutely surrounded by hot, hard, virile man flesh.

At least, he was pretty sure he was awake and not dreaming. In a dream, he wouldn't be overly hot, right? And Ben's leg wouldn't be pinching his thigh. Oh, and his heavy arm wouldn't be interfering with Oliver's ability to breathe.

His cock would probably be poking him in the butt, though. Like a velvet-covered steel homing missile.

There were worse things.

"You smell good," Ben rumbled in his ear, his voice sleepy and slurred. Sexy.

"Yeah?" Oliver's voice wasn't much better. "You're a cuddler, eh?"

Ben grunted an affirmative, cuddling closer—then froze. "Oh shit, I'm—"

"Don't you dare apologize." Oliver rolled his hips to press his butt against Ben's missile.

Ben swallowed audibly. "No?"

"No."

"For real?"

Oliver flipped over so he could grab Ben's face and stare into his eyes. "For really real."

And then he kissed him.

It wasn't slow and languid, or even all that gentle, as maybe first kisses should be. There was lots of tongue, a bit of teeth. Passionate—just as hot and hard as Ben's muscular body and enthusiastic dick. Before he knew it, Ben had rolled onto his back, taking Oliver with him, and Oliver was suddenly sprawled over a sexy, sexy man. Their cocks lined up together, the best feeling, and Oliver rolled his hips again, with even more purpose this time. The drag of hardness against hardness, even with the layers of underwear between—god, it was *so good*. Oliver groaned. Ben moaned—then froze, doubt clouding his gaze.

"Are you sure... Should we be doing this?"

Oh no. Oh *hell* no. Oliver was not going to waste this opportunity, now that he had Ben where he wanted him—where he'd wanted him for weeks, if he was being honest. In bed, needy, hard, hopefully aching with want, just like Oliver himself was. He rolled his hips again, a flash of satisfaction arcing through him as Ben's eyes rolled back.

He leaned down low, so his lips were brushing Ben's earlobe. "I don't give a fuck if we should or not," he whispered. "I want you."

Ben swallowed, the click of his throat audible. "God. Fuck. Okay. Yeah. Let's... Yeah."

Oliver pulled back with a grin, thrilled at the idea that he'd reduced Ben to nonsensical one-word sentences. He lifted up and tugged at Ben's boxer briefs. Ben arched his butt off the bed in obvious invitation to remove the offending garment. Oliver did so, and saliva flooded his mouth at the sight of Ben's rigid cock slapping his stomach.

"I knew that thing was a missile," Oliver murmured.

"What?"

Oliver just shook his head and shucked off his pajama pants. He wore nothing underneath, and his own dick stood out proudly. It was slimmer than Ben's monster, but a little longer, and Oliver swore he could see Ben's pupils expand with lust as he eyed it.

"Oh yeah. That. In me." Ben let his legs fall further apart.

"You bottom?"

"Fuck yes, I bottom." Ben scowled. "Don't tell me you buy into the stupid stereotypes of big guys only giving?"

In Oliver's experience, it hadn't really been a stereotype. All the guys he'd been with—guys like Ben, big and tough-looking with freaking drool-worthy muscles—they'd all insisted on topping. But hell, if Ben wanted Oliver's dick, he could have it.

A lot.

Over and over again.

Jesus Christ.

Ben grabbed his thigh, right by one of his knees, and pulled his legs that much further apart. Oliver wanted to rub his hands all over that hairy flesh—and then he realized he *could*, so he did. The hair on Ben's legs was rough—wiry and *there*, but not too much. Enough to add texture and interest. He scratched his blunt nails along Ben's skin, and Ben groaned at the sensation.

"Yeah?" Oliver husked.

"Oh yeah. More."

Oliver loved how Ben didn't ask him to rush, didn't seem to be impatient for the endgame. He was so tired of guys who thought only penetration counted as fucking. Simple touch could be too—kisses, love bites, gentle scratches. Licks.

Oliver drew his tongue from the base of Ben's thick cock to the tip, loving how Ben tensed beneath him. Ben's scent surrounded him, enveloping him in a way nothing else could. He smelled of sun-warmed prairie grasses, and tilled earth, with a hint of honey that could be wildflowers or Ben's own natural sweetness. Oliver nudged Ben's missile upward, then lowered his mouth over it as far as he could.

"God, *Oliver*." Ben moaned. "So good."

Oliver hummed in agreement. There was something so powerful about reducing a strong, virile man to little more than putty with only his mouth. With this little bit of attention, he could make Ben's body react without his brain being engaged—as evidenced by how Ben's hips were bobbing without concern about how deep he was going into Oliver's throat.

Deep. And he loved it.

He took his time loving Ben's dick—kissing, licking, sucking, but backing off whenever Ben's movements got too frantic. Ben huffed, like the bull he was, but he never complained at the teasing. Oliver got the sense that he knew it wasn't teasing, not at all—it was exploration and discovery. *Foreplay*. What a concept.

It took forever, and no time at all, before Oliver couldn't hold back any longer. He needed to be inside of Ben. He needed to feel how Ben would grip him and hold him tight.

He just *needed*.

There was lube in the drawer—which would be creepy if Oliver thought about how Paul had made sure they were supplied, so he resolutely shoved the lube's origin out of his head. At least it was a completely new bottle with the seal still intact. Oliver used it to slick himself up and prep Ben. Despite his eagerness, Ben's hole was tight, and Oliver didn't want to hurt him. He took his time opening Ben

up, getting him ready, and pegging his prostrate with his fingertip just to hear Ben bellow with pleasure. It was a fucking amazing sound.

Oliver pressed the head of his cock against Ben's opening. "Let me in," he murmured.

"Yeah."

"C'mon. C'mon."

Slowly, so slowly, Oliver sank inside. Ben grunted out breaths, sounding more like a bull with every inch Oliver gained. Finally, he was all the way in, but he didn't move right away. No, a certain huffing bison bull needed a kiss first.

"You're cute." Oliver nudged his nose against Ben's and teased his lips with his own.

"Fuck that, I'm not cute. You're cute."

Oliver swiveled his hips, reveling at the feeling of being surrounded by warm, welcoming flesh. "Uh huh."

"Oh, fuck, Ol, just *move*."

Oliver drew back and thrust back in, hard. Ben keened and it made Oliver's inner crane puff up with pride. Yeah—*he'd* made Ben sound like that. Him. No one else. And he'd make him make that sound again...and again...and again...

Before long, Oliver was thrusting in abandon, completely lost in the need to climax, to come, to *mate*. He reached down to stroke Ben's cock, but already found Ben's hand there, doing the job. He intertwined their fingers and helped him along.

"Yeah. Oh *god*, yeah. Coming!"

Oliver watched as white streams of spunk spurted across Ben's hairy abs, and the sight of it, the feeling of Ben's body contracting around him—it pushed him over the edge with him. Oliver shouted

—as loudly as he'd ever sung his greeting to the sun—and collapsed on Ben's chest.

They panted for a few minutes, almost in sync. Ben's hand idly brushed Oliver's hair, and Oliver gave Ben's chest tiny, random kisses. Oliver didn't know how long it was before Ben rumbled, "You're loud."

Oliver chuckled. "I'm loud? You sounded like your bull was about to emerge, Mr. McSnorterson."

"I wasn't snorting."

"Oh, sorry. Mr. McHufferson."

Ben pushed at Oliver's head, but without any real strength behind it. "I was gonna say it was cute, but I was wrong—you're not cute. You're a menace."

"I'm totally a menace."

"I kinda l—like that about you."

Oliver lifted his head to see a blush spread across Ben's cheeks that had nothing to do with his recent exertions. "Back atcha," he said, smiling. "Mr. McHufferson."

"I'll show you huffing." Ben reached down and pulled Oliver up to him, before flipping their positions so that Oliver was under him.

Oliver had zero complaints.

Ben stifled a yawn as Paul and his contact—would-be business partner? friend? Ben wasn't entirely sure—switched to yet another new, unimportant topic. Who knew being a bodyguard could be so freaking boring? Not much seemed to be expected of him other than to stand around and look dangerous. Ben wasn't entirely sure how to do that, so he scowled a lot. By the pat on his shoulder he'd gotten from Paul, he assumed it was working.

They weren't at a strip club this time, but an upscale restaurant. The kind where each table had multiple waiters—one for water, one for bread, one for freaking cutlery, and so on—and no prices on the menu. The atmosphere was dim and gloomy, though Ben supposed they were trying for intimate, and other than Paul and Rylee, his friend, there was no one else in the place. Ben wasn't sure if it was because the restaurant wasn't officially open, it wasn't popular, or if Paul or Rylee had bought out the entire place to do their deal.

Though, at this point, Ben was starting to wonder if this was just a social visit. Maybe a date? He started out watching Rylee, cataloguing all of her features in case he needed to report on it later. He was pretty sure she was a shifter, though he couldn't tell what type. Not a bird—she lacked Oliver's gracefulness and she didn't show

the head tilts and quick movements Ben associated with other bird breeds. She also didn't have a predatory air, so Ben guessed she was a herd animal of some sort. Maybe. He wished he'd had more classes on identifying shifters in their human form.

Another point in the favor of this being a social visit—the woman didn't look anything like what Ben expected a female mobster would look like. She was middle-aged, short in stature, and round. Her cheeks, her face, her bust and her hips, all round and soft. She looked like a soccer mom. When she laughed, she threw her head back, her short brown bob swaying with the movement, her blue eyes sparkling. Honestly, she was the sort of person that if Ben had met her in another context, she would have immediately put him at ease.

Paul and Rylee smiled at the waiter as he took away their entrée plates and another waiter deposited the espresso Paul had ordered and Rylee's caramel latte. Paul leaned back in his chair, his posture changing. Something in the way he was looking at Rylee told Ben that it was on. Whatever *it* was.

"Your last shipment was...lacking," Paul said casually.

Rylee's shoulders stiffened, though if Ben wasn't looking for it—surreptitiously—he wouldn't have noticed. *Note, don't play poker with criminals.* "That's your opinion."

"It's fact."

"The product was in prime condition."

"Some of it," Paul conceded with a nod. "Most of it was uninspiring."

Ben had no idea what they were talking about. Drugs? The kind of description they were using didn't really fit drugs. Stolen artwork? That seemed a bit high-end for Paul. He wanted to seem

classy, but the dude held meetings in strip clubs, for god's sake. He and classy had only a passing acquaintance.

Oh...maybe guns. That fit better than drugs and artwork.

"My product was top quality, and you know it, Paul." Rylee smirked as she dipped a biscotti into her coffee. "You're trying to work me up so I'll give you a better deal on the next one."

Paul returned her smile. "You know me too well."

"I mean, you're more than welcome to try to do business elsewhere, but I guarantee you won't get the quality of merchandise that I can provide."

Ben looked around the room as he stuffed his frustration deep down. He couldn't go back to the academy with only a vague idea of what they were talking about. Getting a name of Paul's contact was good, but not as good as knowing *what the fuck they were talking about*.

He caught movement out of the corner of his eye. Someone had just ducked back behind a booth, too fast for Ben to identify anything about them. Before he could think his actions through, he was moving in that direction. When the head popped out again, with a phone held up, he grabbed the person's arm and yanked them into view.

It was a young Asian woman, dressed in the uniform of the restaurant. Ben was pretty sure she was human. Her brown eyes were wide as she looked up at him, and she didn't struggle.

"I'm sorry!" She pressed her lips together tightly for a second. "I'm really sorry. It's just that—it's Nathan Rashad's *mother*."

Ben frowned. "Who?"

"Oh my god," she squealed. "*Nathan Rashad*. The winner of Canada Goes for Gold? The singing contest? Do you seriously not know this? *How can you not know this?*"

“Barrett? Who have you got there?”

Ben looked over his shoulder to see Paul’s other bodyguard, Valentin, had moved to stand between the threat and Paul. Paul was craning his neck around Valentin’s bulk.

Shit. Ben didn’t think Paul would get rid of an innocent human, but he wasn’t sure. Problem was, he couldn’t think of any way to get her out of the restaurant without blowing his own cover—and he couldn’t do that, not yet.

If there’s any sign she’s in danger...

“A Nathan Rashad fan, sir.”

“I see.” Paul smiled, but even from across the room, Ben could see his eyes didn’t reflect the expression. “Well, bring her over. I’m sure Rylee won’t mind saying hi.”

Ben glanced at Rylee to see her happy soccer-mom mask was back in place. “Not at all. Come here, dear.”

Ben released the girl’s arm and herded her over to the table. She was all but vibrating, she was so excited.

“Ma’am—Mrs. Rashad—it’s such an honor to meet you. I’m Nathan’s biggest fan and I couldn’t believe it when I saw you. I would have asked to be one of your servers, but I just came in a few minutes ago.”

Rylee took the woman’s hand in hers in a light grip. “Lovely to meet you, Miss...?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Lisbeth. Lisbeth Saito.”

“I’ll let Nathan know how excited you were to see me,” Rylee assured her with a smile. “Though maybe next time it’s not the best idea to eavesdrop, hm?”

“Oh! I didn’t. I wasn’t. I just wanted a picture to prove it was you. But...you purposely arranged an empty restaurant for privacy

and...I'm so sorry, I didn't even *think*." She sighed. "I'm so going to get fired for this."

"I'd be happy to have a word with the manager, dear."

"You'd talk to Mr. Karga?"

"Certainly. If you hand over your phone."

Lisbeth looked at the device she was clutching, and with a sigh, gave it to Rylee. "I only took two photos."

"Thank you, dear." Rylee made the phone disappear, and handed over a card. "Contact me at this number with your address, and we'll get you a replacement, okay?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Rashad. And again, I'm so sorry, I didn't—I shouldn't have—"

Paul flicked his fingers and Ben took that as his hint to guide Lisbeth away from the table, toward the kitchen. As they passed through the swinging doors, Ben whispered, "Don't call that number."

"What?" she said, startled.

"Trust me, please. Don't call it."

Maybe she saw something in his eyes, or maybe she was putting two and two together on her own and realizing just how close she'd come to disaster, but she slowly nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, okay."

Ben didn't let his soft breath of relief escape, nor did he thank Lisbeth for showing up when she did. Because now he knew who Rylee was, beyond a first name...and that was something tangible he could pass along to FUC.

It didn't take long for Oliver to discover that there wasn't much for a bored significant other to do at the ranch. He did a yoga routine after

Ben left, which prepared him for the day—and stretched out some muscles that were in sore need of stretching after their morning activities. Then he headed down to the kitchen to get breakfast, where he discovered Paul employed a cook who did not like strangers in his space. So much for cooking to pass the time.

After he ate his yogurt with granola and fruit, he decided it was time for some recon. First, he toured the interior of the house, mapping out all of the ingress and egress points while oohing and ah-ing again over the movie room, the games room, and the indoor pool. But as soon as he tried to step outside, through one of the French doors leading off the pool, a guard was there, on the other side of the door, preventing his exit.

That didn't stop him from trying again, this time from the sun-room next to the kitchen. Another guard appeared to block his way. Either there was a silent alarm going off in their ears, or they were keeping a very close eye on Oliver's movements. Hell, maybe both.

Whatever the case was, it was clear he wasn't going to be able to explore the ranch's exterior...and that made Oliver all the more determined to do so.

As he was passing back through the kitchen, the cook shoved a plate with a sandwich into his hands. Oliver was about to protest that he'd just eaten not two hours before, but bit back the words.

"Thank you," he said instead. "I think I'll take this up to my room, if that's okay?"

"Don't make a mess for the housekeeper," the cook grumbled.

"I won't," Oliver promised him. "I'll probably have a nap afterwards."

The cook grunted, obviously uninterested in Oliver's plans. That was okay—he'd made that announcement for the guards' benefit.

He hurried upstairs and took a couple of minutes to nibble at the food. Then he moved over to the window Jeremy had slipped through that morning and eyed the size of the opening. Though the window itself was quite large, the pane that levered upward to let in air while preventing rain from coming in was only two feet by two feet. Plenty of room for a squirrel...not so much for a whooping crane. He could fit through it, but it was going to be awkward to get his long legs through and his wings open and flapping before he hit the ground.

Whatever. He'd make it work.

Quickly, he stripped and shifted. It had been too long since he'd enjoyed his feathered form. He stretched out his wings and neck, barely resisting the urge to sing out his enjoyment. That would bring the guards, and that would be bad.

As he anticipated, getting out through the window was awkward and uncomfortable, and almost resulted in him tumbling straight to the ground. Luckily instincts took over and he unfurled his wings, flapping as hard as he could until he caught an updraft. Then, rising over the ranch was effortless, and he got his first good look at the entirety of the compound.

The house was enormous—which he already knew, thanks to his interior tour. Next to the house was a detached garage, which, again, he'd already seen the night before. It was big, but as far as Oliver knew, held only cars. Behind the house and garage, though, were buildings Oliver had only glimpsed earlier.

One looked like a typical barn, big and black instead of red, but with the iconic arched roof. Another building was smaller, a thinner rectangle, and might have been a stable. A third, further away from the house, was somewhere in between—wide like the barn, but not as large. The shape of it tickled Oliver's memory for a moment, until

it came to him. It looked like a hangar, though a small one. Was there a landing strip on the property? He hadn't heard any planes coming in. Maybe they'd cleared a runway...somewhere. But it didn't seem likely, since they were surrounded by hills and forests. Not the most ideal terrain for aircraft.

Getting close to the barn in his feathered form wasn't easy. His wingspan was enormous—nearly eight feet wide—and not suited to a forest landing. There was a small strip of land behind the barn before the trees, thankfully. He landed there, the barn blocking any view of him from the house, and shifted quickly. Paul had already proved himself less than technically savvy, and it was the same situation here—no cameras to tattle on him to the guards.

Oliver nudged a person-sized door open and stopped to listen. Silence greeted him, which was...weird. Wasn't it? He'd never thought of a barn as being a quiet place, though admittedly, he didn't have much experience with them. But animals made noise, right? So he should be hearing *something*, even if it was only a cow breathing.

Nothing.

He slipped through the door and discovered the barn...wasn't a barn at all.

Where the stalls for animals should be were rows of what looked like jail cells. They were all empty of people right now, but the cots with thin blankets and buckets for—Oliver barely held back a gag as he realized what they were for—well, it all indicated that the cells were ready for people.

Oliver quickly counted them. Ten cells. Something else caught his eye—little ceramic thingies that tickled another memory. Shit. Were the cages electrified?

Jail cells with locks would be enough to hold humans, so Oliver had to assume that these cells were meant to hold shifters. But why? Were they getting ready for some type of war and needed space to house prisoners? Or was this a holding base for another round of shifter experiments, like what had been done in the past?

Neither case was good.

Oliver quickly exited the way he'd come, only to stop short at the sight of a guard rounding the corner of the barn. He froze as the guard shouted, "Stop!"

You're harmless. A nobody. Oliver's hands shot up in the air. "I-I'm sorry! I was just bored."

"What were you doing in there?"

"Just looking around. I thought maybe Mr. Paul had a horse I could ride."

"Naked?"

Oliver glanced down. "Well, no. But I was flying and—" He bit his lip. "Please don't tell on me. I didn't mean to make trouble, I swear." For good measure, he let his eyes well up with tears. "I don't want to piss Mr. Paul off on my first day here, you know?"

The guard huffed out a disgusted sigh, maybe at Oliver's begging or the tears about to fall, he didn't know. "Yeah, yeah, fine. Get your ass back inside."

Oliver didn't have to be told twice. He scrambled across the yard toward the house, and tried to get a good look at the other buildings as he passed. The guard stayed close behind him, though, so he couldn't look his fill. At first glance, the rectangular building and the hangar seemed normal enough. Oliver wished he'd had more time to explore and discover the truth.

At least he had something to share with Ben when he got back. And hopefully Ben would have a piece to this puzzle too.

Ben didn't open the door to the room he shared with Oliver until close to midnight. By that point, he was all but dead on his feet. Standing around doing nothing—mostly—was hard. Every muscle in his back was whining in protest. He'd gotten used to being active while at the academy, and standing around all day was not a good substitute.

"Honey, I'm home," he said as he spotted Oliver sitting in a chair by the window where Jeremy had come in.

"Thank god." Oliver unfolded his legs from where they'd been tucked under him, graceful as always, and made his way across the room. "Are you okay?" He lifted a hand like he wanted to cup Ben's face, but hesitated.

Ben laid his cheek in Oliver's palm, and Oliver took that as an invitation to move closer. "I'm fine. Better now."

"I can touch you?"

"Any way and any time you like." Ben tilted his head at the slight confusion on Oliver's features. "Ol, what kind of men have you dated before?"

"Not good ones."

"I guess not."

"Is this...what we're doing? Dating?"

Ben smirked. "Have you forgotten already? We're *married*."

Oliver smacked his biceps. "Jerk."

That tugged a tired chuckle out of Ben before he sobered again. "I found some stuff out."

"Me too. This place..." Oliver shuddered. "It's not a good place."

"No kidding. Look, I—"

A knock on the door interrupted what Ben was about to say. He shot Oliver a questioning look, and Oliver shrugged and shook his head. No one had a reason to bother them at this time of night, unless Paul needed Ben for something?

Gah, he hoped not. All he wanted to do was crawl into bed, wallow in the mattress until he made a nice Ben Beaufort-shaped dent in it, and fall asleep with Oliver in his arms.

Taking a breath and pulling the Barrett persona around him again, Ben opened the door. "What?" he demanded, with just the right level of belligerence in his voice.

Regan, Paul's right-hand man, raised a brow. "Mr. Paul wants to see you and your husband downstairs. Now."

Shit. *Shit*. Was their cover blown? "Why?"

"You don't get paid to question orders," Regan barked. He looked over Ben's shoulder and snapped his fingers at Oliver. "You. C'mon, Mr. Paul wants to see you too."

Oliver sidled up to Ben and Ben automatically draped his arm over Oliver's shoulders, pulling him close. He hoped Oliver found as much comfort in the gesture as Ben did.

Whatever they were facing now, they'd face it together.

Oliver entwined his fingers with Ben's as they entered Paul's study behind Regan. Paul rose from his chair behind his desk and came around the front to lean his butt against it. He wore a suit, the one he'd been wearing all day, Oliver presumed, and he left his jacket unbuttoned.

Now now, don't relax too much, buddy.

Paul gave Ben a nod and then turned his attention to Oliver. "Nice to see you again, Ricky. My men mentioned you had a self-guided tour of the grounds this afternoon."

He should've known the guard wouldn't keep it to himself. His loyalty was clearly with his boss. Oliver put on his "good boy getting scolded" face. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause any trouble."

"I'm sure you didn't. But it's a pretty big clue when the guards prevent you from leaving the house, don't you think?"

"I n-needed to fly." Oliver moved so he was pressed against Ben's side, and it wasn't entirely an act. Paul's eyes were cold, emotionless, and Oliver knew he meant less than nothing to the man. He wondered if anyone did.

Paul tilted his head. "I can understand that. Our animal instincts are difficult to ignore. It doesn't explain why one of my men found you coming out of the barn."

"Like I told him," Oliver started, giving Ben an apologetic look, "I was bored. I thought maybe there was a horse I could ride? Or... something."

"You didn't find anything amusing in the barn?"

Crap. What was the right answer? "I, uh, found something interesting." Paul gestured for him to go on, and Oliver prayed it was the right choice. "Cages?"

Ben tightened his grip on Oliver's fingers. Did the presence of cages mean something to him?

"No horses, then."

"N-no, sir. No horses."

Paul eyed Oliver without blinking. Enough time passed that Oliver fought the urge to squirm or say something, just to fill the silence with sound. Just to make Paul do something instead of standing there, staring...

Finally, Paul nodded. "I should have guessed that someone who was used to being the center of attention would find life on the ranch somewhat boring."

"I'm sorry," Oliver said in a small voice.

"No, no, don't be sorry. I think I have a solution that will suit us all." Paul shot Regan a look, and Regan gave a nod. Paul straightened with a smile. "Come, let me show you to your new workplace, Ricky."

New workplace. Oh, man, this couldn't be good.

Paul and Regan led them outside, flanked by other guards. Oliver was surprised to see a large moving truck parked on the asphalt between the barn and the other stable-like building. More figures milled about, male and female, all dressed in black fatigues or similar clothing. He hadn't heard any of the activity from inside the house. Too distracted by Ben being back, he supposed.

If he needed more proof that they were probably (definitely) in over their heads...

Someone rolled up the back door of the moving van and hopped into the cargo compartment. A moment later, a young woman appeared, blinking at the dimly lit compound.

Oliver stopped breathing.

She couldn't be out of her teens by much—if she even was. Her clothes were ripped and dirty and her hair was knotted. Everything

about her body language screamed of fear and uncertainty. And then he saw the cuffs that bound her wrists together in front of her.

Ben squeezed his fingers again, hard enough to hurt, and that made Oliver suck in a breath. Another young woman appeared, then a young man, followed by another. In all, Oliver counted ten—enough to fill the cages inside the barn.

Paul let out a satisfied sigh. “Beautiful, aren’t they?”

Oliver managed to make an affirmative noise without opening his mouth. He was worried he’d puke if he did.

“They’re all prey shifters,” Paul continued, an unsettling glint in his eye. “Submissive and compliant.”

“Excellent.” Ben’s voice was rough, but with any luck, Paul would think it was because he was excited. “Sir, can I ask what you plan to do with them?”

“They’re here until we find them new homes.” Paul shot a grin in Oliver’s direction. “And that’s where you come in, Ricky. You’re going to show them your moves on the stage. It will keep you occupied and give them a skill to wow their companions. A win-win all around.”

Winning wasn’t the word Oliver would have used to describe the situation.

He listened in a daze as Paul explained that the men and women were housed in the barn overnight, but then taken into the smaller stable-like building—the rec room—to spend the day. According to Paul, it was less cruel than leaving them in the cages all day. After all, they were animals at heart, and cages weren’t healthy.

Oliver thought he might puke anyway if Paul kept talking. Finally he sent them off with an invitation to Oliver to return at mid-morning to start their lessons.

Oliver didn't remember the walk back to their room, but when the door clicked closed behind them, he fell forward into Ben's massive chest. He couldn't stop shaking—why was he shaking so much?

Ben rubbed his arms. "It's okay, Ol."

"Not even close," Oliver managed, his voice shaking just as hard as the rest of his body.

"No. I know," Ben said with a sigh. "We'll get them out."

Oliver nodded against Ben's chest, because yeah, not rescuing the shifters had never crossed his mind. "It could have been me," he whispered.

"What?"

He lifted his head. "I could have been one of those kids." Because even if they were legally of age, they were still kids. Jesus. "I lived on the streets for a few months when I was sixteen. This old egret lady saw me one day and took me in. 'Birds of a feather!' she used to say all the time, and then cackle like it was the greatest thing. Her name was Edith. She saved me."

"What happened to your parents?"

"They didn't like that I was gay."

"Jesus."

"It's okay," Oliver rushed on. "I'm okay. I reconnected with some of my other family years ago, people who accept me as me. But if Edith hadn't been around to help..." He swallowed and his throat clicked. "It could have been me in a truck like that."

"They talked about 'product' at lunch today. I thought it was guns. Not people. Never people."

"When I saw the cages in the barn, I knew it was going to be bad. We need to call it in."

Oliver retrieved the cell phone Jeremy had smuggled to them the night before and opened a text to the number he'd memorized. He

tried to think of a clever code-worded way of saying what he needed to say, but in the end, he just went for the truth.

"Product" is captured shifters waiting for "new homes." Please advise.

It took only a minute to get a response. Timeline to move them?

Unknown. But he's asked O to teach them to dance.

Understood. We'll move tomorrow night. Stay in place until then.

"Oh, hey, give them a name for me. Rylee Rashad." Ben briefly explained the meeting and the encounter with the human fan who inadvertently identified Paul's contact.

B says Paul met with Rylee Rashad this afternoon. She's the supplier.

Interesting intel. Good job. Stay in touch through the day tomorrow and let us know if anything changes.

Will do.

Oliver erased the text thread, hid the phone back in a pair of socks in the drawer, and sighed. Instantly, Ben was there, rubbing his arm. "What is it?"

"I want to get them out of there *now*."

Ben kissed Oliver's neck, a gentle, barely there touch, but it reverberated through Oliver's system like someone had struck a gong inside of him.

"I know," Ben murmured. "But FUC will bring in a team of experienced agents. I don't know about you, but I'm about at my limit, you know? Don't get me wrong. I feel like we're making a difference. I just..."

"Feel like you've been tossed overboard with a slowly deflating raft?"

Ben chuckled. "Something like that, yeah." He kissed Oliver again. "Come to bed. We can't do anything tonight."

Oliver smiled. "We can do each other."

"That's terrible."

Oliver jumped his bull. "I'll show you terrible."

Ben gazed at him, heat and something more in his eyes. "Never."

Ben kissed Oliver and watched him leave through the French doors off the kitchen, one of the exterior guards trailing him as he made his way over to the rec room. They'd watched the ten shifters be herded over to it a few minutes ago, but the guards wouldn't let Oliver out until they were all back behind closed, and Ben assumed locked, doors.

God, he hoped FUC moved quickly. He hoped none of the captive shifters got hurt. He hoped none of the FUC agents did, either. He hoped—

"Mother *fucker*!"

Ben almost dropped his coffee cup at Paul's shout. He left it on the counter, ignoring the bit of java that spilled, and raced into Paul's study. Regan and two other guards had beat him there. Paul looked agitated, pacing behind his giant desk, his hair showing evidence of a hand having been run through it quickly.

"Boss?" Regan ventured.

"Rylee's place was raided by the human cops this morning," Paul snarled. He paused in his pacing to grab a glass paperweight from his desk and throw it at the wall as hard as he could.

It shattered on impact, splinters flying everywhere. Regan hissed and brushed his hand against his cheek. It came away smeared with blood, but Paul didn't notice.

"The human cops are supposed to be oblivious. I *pay* them enough to be oblivious."

Regan swiped at his cheek one last time. "We'll find out who—"

"Yeah, we will. But for right now..." Paul shook his head. "Get rid of them."

"Boss?"

"We'll move locations in the next few weeks, once I get something lined up. But in the meantime, I don't want any evidence of anything here. In case they raid us. Got it? Everything goes."

"On it." Regan turned on his heel to carry out Paul's order, but shock kept Ben rooted to the spot.

"Get rid of them how?" he blurted out.

"We're going to set them free in the forest." Regan smacked the back of Ben's head. "How do you think, idiot?"

Kill them? They were going to *kill* them?

Well, yeah. What did you do when your "product" became inconvenient?

You liquidated it.

Ben nodded slowly, like he was processing Regan's words, and let Regan and the other two guards precede him out of Paul's study. When they reached the kitchen, he acted.

He shoved Regan from behind into the counter, feeling a distant satisfaction when his head cracked against the granite. Regan dropped like a stone, and Ben turned his attention to the two guards. He kicked one in the balls—as hard as he could—and tried not to wince in sympathy as the guy crumpled in on himself. The other pulled out his gun, but Ben grabbed his wrist and put him in an arm

bar until something gave with a snap. The guy howled and fell to his knees. Regan struggled back to his feet, blinking and blurry eyed. Ben spun and nailed him in the head with a reverse kick. It connected and Regan dropped again. *Yes!* He wouldn't have been able to do that move a month ago, without Oliver's flexibility training. But he didn't have time to celebrate.

He had to get the shifters out. He had to save Oliver.

A bullet whizzed by his ear as he reached the building where Oliver and the other shifters were for dance lessons. Low bass notes reverberated through the walls. Another bullet hit the wood beside his head. He yanked at the handles of the double doors, but the doors wouldn't budge. Locked. Fuck! A third bullet struck the wall and something bit Ben's cheek—probably a splinter. He couldn't waste any more time trying to get in.

He shifted.

He was big for a bull bison—nearly seven feet tall and close to three tons, bigger than most of his non-shifter cousins. It made him an easier target to shoot at, but it was a risk he had to take to get to Oliver and the other shifters. He let out a loud bellow and rammed his head against the double doors leading into the rec room. The wood split but didn't give, so he backed up and rammed them again.

This time he burst through.

Screams and shouts greeted him, along with loud dance music. It took a few seconds for him to be able to spot Oliver through the dust and debris, but when he did, Oliver's eyes were wide and disbelieving. "Ben?" he shouted over the ruckus.

Ben shifted back to his human self and dove sideways as more gunfire erupted.

"Holy shit!" Oliver hit the ground and belly-crawled over to Ben.
"What the hell is going on?"

"It's gone to shit. Paul ordered the shifters killed."

"What? Why?"

"His partner's place was raided by the human police. He wants no evidence hanging around."

Oliver lifted his head slightly to eye the wrecked doorway and the bullets that continued to fly into the wall. "Uh huh."

"We've got to get them out of here."

"To where?"

"I don't know—the woods?" They were prey animals—which meant they could blend in and get lost in the forest for a little while, right? "It's all I've got!"

Oliver bit his lip. "I don't know if I'll be able to get them to shift and run."

Ben glanced at the other occupants of the room. "I don't think that will be a problem."

The shifters had all taken their animal forms, driven by instinct and fear. They were huddled in one corner of the room, but they were all eying the hole Ben had made in the doors. The occasional bullet hitting the wood kept them where they were, though. There was a deer, a gazelle, two gophers, a rabbit with giant back legs and ears, a...a fucking *zebra*, a chinchilla, and...

A tiny, guinea-pig sized hippo.

Ben blinked. "Is that a *house hippo*?"

Oliver squinted at him because yeah, okay, not the time to debate the existence of what Ben had thought was a fictional creature.

"How hard is your head?"

Pretty hard, as it turned out.

There was another set of double doors on the opposite end of the rec room. This time, when Ben rammed them, they popped off their hinges, making a nice ramp over the two flattened guards who had been about to open them. Ben bellowed at the other shifters to follow, and Oliver, still in human form, shouted at them. Given an escape route, the prey shifters let their instincts take over, and they ran.

As a whooping crane, Oliver would make an even more tempting target than Ben, with no cover in the sky. So he stayed in human form, and Ben ran behind him, shielding him with his bulk. Luckily the guards only seemed to have pistols—their range and accuracy were terrible. Still, Ben felt a couple of bites to his behind, and one to the hump of his shoulder, but they didn't slow him down. The other shifters ran ahead of them, straight for the tree line, and one by one, they slipped into cover.

Ben barrelled into it. Tall, skinny pine trees bowed under his bulk, snapping back behind him. This wasn't going to work—his giant body had been an asset out in the open, but in the thick of the forest, it only gave away their progress. Once they were deep enough in the forest that the sunlight was muted, Ben shifted back into his human form.

And hissed in pain.

Oliver skidded to a stop. "What is it?"

"I'm good." A little fib. Ben reached around to touch his wounded butt.

"Then why are you grimacing—" Oliver's eyes widened as he spotted the glistening red liquid staining Ben's fingers. "Oh my god, did you get hit?"

"A little."

"How can you be a little shot?" Oliver darted around to check Ben's back. "Wait...these don't look too bad." Gently he poked at

one of the wounds, and Ben hissed again. "Sorry."

"The bullets didn't penetrate my hide much and when I shifted, they were forced out of my skin. Only superficial damage, I promise."

"For real?"

"If they'd been at closer range, or if they were using rifles, it'd be a different story." Ben offered a shaky smile. "Seriously, I'm okay."

Oliver inhaled. "You'd better stay that way."

They caught up to the chinchilla a few minutes later and Oliver scooped her up into his arms. She barked but settled quickly, and they continued on. As Ben had suspected—hoped?—the prey shifters had blended into the forest. Mostly. They found the gazelle with his antlers tangled in some low-hanging branches. Ben untangled him and they moved on, gathering up other creatures as they made their way through the forest. None of them were ready to shift back yet—completely understandable—and Ben had to bite back a squeal of delight as he picked up the house hippo.

"You are *so cool*," he gushed at her.

He felt a little like Snow White as they continued on with all of the shifters surrounding them. He had no idea where they were going—just *away* from the horrors of Paul's ranch. They tromped through the woods and slowly, Ben became aware of a sound other than the crunch of forest debris beneath their feet and the prey shifters' harsh breaths.

Rushing water.

They pushed through a barrier of ferns and spotted the source of the noise—a river. Well, okay, maybe it was a little small to be called a river, but it was definitely wider than a creek. Water sped past rocks and under a fallen log a short distance downriver, frothing and generally looking threatening.

“What do you think?” Ben asked Oliver.

“I’d say it’s a good opportunity to mask our scent trail, but I’m not sure everyone can ford it.”

“Can you fly some of the smaller shifters across?” Ben eyed the house hippo in his arms and the chinchilla in Oliver’s.

Oliver wrinkled his nose. “Not safely. I’d have to hold them in my beak, and it’s not meant for gripping and carrying.”

All right. Okay. They could plan their way through this. “Can anyone shift back?”

The gazelle, the deer, and the zebra managed—which was awesome, since Ben was pretty sure carrying any of them in their animal form would have been awkward at best. If he even had the strength to do it.

He gave them a thumb’s up. “Good job. Anyone else?”

The gophers, the jackrabbit, the house hippo and the chinchilla shook with nerves.

“It’s cool,” Ben assured them. “I can carry you.”

Oliver bit his lip as he regarded the fast-moving river with its quasi-rapids. “You sure, Ben? The water looks rough.”

Ben bent down to let the gophers climb his arms, and scooped up the jackrabbit. Her long back legs made carrying her and the house hippo challenging...but he could do it, dammit. “I’m going to walk across the log.”

At that proclamation, Oliver’s expression grew even more worried. “Really? Maybe I should—”

“Ol...I’m good. I promise. I’ve got the bulk to carry them. You just worry about yourself and the other shifters, okay? Make sure they get across.”

For a moment, Ben thought Oliver was going to argue some more, but he gave a quick nod. “You got this.”

Ben waited until Oliver and the deer, gazelle, and zebra shifter darted across the log, displaying the innate grace of their animal forms in their surefooted steps. His passengers remained still, far more still than their full-animal counterparts could ever have been. When Oliver and his charges were safe on the other side of the river, Ben took a deep breath.

Showtime.

He stepped onto the log. It didn't creak—thank god—but it was slipperier than he expected, what with the moss and mist covering the wood. He took one step, then another, until he was standing directly over the water. The rushing water, racing under his feet, and giving him vertigo—

He jerked his eyes up and corrected his balance, adjusting the weight distribution of the tiny hippo and giant jackrabbit in his arms. They stayed silent, probably terrified that if they made a noise, they'd all fall in and get swept away. *Okay, so, looking down is not a good plan. Noted.* He edged forward, sliding his feet along instead of taking full steps.

They'd reached the middle of the log when he felt it shift. He didn't have time to wonder why—he had to act. *Now.* He ran, automatically compensating when his foot slipped, or when he felt his balance tipping. Finally he leaped off the end and managed to stay upright even when he encountered the slick grass at the top of the riverbank.

He took a knee—presumably to let his passengers get off, but really, he needed a minute to catch his breath.

"The dismount was a little rough, but I give you ten on the landing," Oliver said, clapping Ben's shoulder. "You okay?"

Ben rose and shook all over, like a bison bull rearranging his hump. "Yep."

Their party ventured forth once again. They'd been walking for less than half an hour when the jackrabbit's nose began to twitch. She started in a new direction before pausing to make sure they were behind her.

"Follow?" Ben asked Oliver.

Oliver shrugged. "I don't think she'd wait for us if it wasn't important we go with her."

Before long, Ben spotted a large, dark shape through the trees. A cabin—one that had seen better days. It was ancient and mostly reclaimed by the forest. Vines crisscrossed the wood that was still intact. The roof was partially collapsed and none of the windows were intact. It was the least inviting place Ben had ever seen—and at the same time, it was the best sight ever.

"Perfect," he said. "Thanks, Ms. Jackrabbit."

She shifted into her human form and promptly sat down. "It's Janelle, actually."

Oliver tugged on Ben's arm, guiding him out of earshot. "I think we should keep moving."

"To where?" Ben countered softly. "Even if I knew exactly where we were, it would be a lot of walking to get anywhere we could get help. And look at them, Ol." He nodded at the group of shifters, some of whom had returned to human form, clearly unused to staying in animal form for extended periods. "They're already tapped out."

"So what do you think we should do?"

"We hole up here. You go for help."

"Ben, I'm not—"

"You're the only one of us who can fly," Ben pointed out.

"I still think you should keep moving. What if Paul's thugs find you?"

"Then we'll hunker down."

"So you can be shot?"

"Or we'll run again." Ben put his hands on Oliver's shoulders. "We'll figure it out. But if you don't tell FUC what happened, we'll be in even more danger."

Oliver bit his lip, and Ben resisted the urge to free it with his own teeth and tongue. "I don't want to leave you," Oliver finally admitted.

Ben leaned his forehead against Oliver's, so glad that Ol was almost the same height as him. "I don't want you to leave either. If it was just you and me, I'd say yeah, fuck it, let's keep walking. But they can't do it."

"Okay." Oliver huffed out a breath, and said in a stronger voice, "Okay. I'll bring the cavalry as fast as I can."

"And I'll keep them safe."

"And you. You have to promise to keep yourself safe too."

Ben leaned back slightly, just enough that he could swipe his thumb across Oliver's cheek. "I promise I'll do my best."

"Ben, I—"

Ben put a finger over Oliver's lips. "Not yet. When we're out of crisis mode, okay?"

Swallowing, Oliver nodded. "You'd better keep your promise."

Then he shifted, and flew off.

Waiting was hard.

Ben sat in the decrepit cabin with the other shifters, watching the filtered sunlight change angles as the day progressed. A couple of the shifters talked quietly, mindful of the need to listen for approaching bad guys, and quite a few of them slept, exhausted from the stress of running for their lives. Ben stayed alert, waiting, waiting, *waiting*.

There were so many things that could go wrong. Oliver could get even more lost. Or he could exhaust himself before he even reached the academy. Or one of Paul's thugs could spot him and shoot him out of the sky. Hell, he could get taken out by a low-flying plane.

Ben thought of each of these outcomes and dismissed them. Oliver wouldn't let them down, he knew that, and his natural optimism kept him feeling positive and if not upbeat, not hopeless either.

At least until the sunlight dimmed into twilight. That's when his optimism cracked.

"Ben?" It was Janelle, the jackrabbit. At some point she'd leaned up against him, herbivore seeking comfort from another herbivore, even if he "smelled like a cow." "Do you think anyone's coming for us?"

"Of course," Ben said, making sure his voice was full of conviction. "FUC will come."

"How do you know?"

"Oliver and I work for them."

"You're agents?"

Admitting he was a trainee and Oliver was a yoga instructor didn't seem to be a good idea at the moment. Besides, being kept on the mission instead of being pulled out was like getting a field promotion, right? Right. "Yeah."

Janelle leaned into him harder. "I thought you might be, with how you got us out of there and everything."

"How'd you get mixed up in this?" Ben asked gently.

"How does anyone get mixed up in something like this? I trusted the wrong person." She sighed. "I was in debt up to my eyeballs and a 'friend' offered to take care of it for me. She didn't tell me there was a catch."

"Similar story for me," Charlie, the gazelle, piped up. "Except I needed a place to stay, and a friend got me hooked up, and before I could say 'what the fucking fuck,' I had handcuffs on and there were guards all around me with bigass guns."

"Jesus," Ben murmured. "Same friend?"

Charlie shook his head. "My friend was a guy."

So it sounded like Rylee had a network of people feeding into her supply chain, which made sense. She wouldn't want to get her hands dirty. "The human cops arrested the woman who sent you all here, but once we're out of this, I'll get details from you on all of these so-called friends, okay? We'll make sure they don't do this to anyone else."

Janelle wrapped her arms around one of Ben's arms and cuddled even closer.

By the time the sun was completely down, Ben was starting to feel the first stirrings of panic. Oliver should have been back well before now. That he wasn't...the scenarios Ben had been trying not to think about rushed through his brain again, each one worse than the last.

Okay, no, stop. You might not be a full agent, but you've got training. You've got to put together a plan to get these people out, to safety.

A plan that would be so much easier to come up with if Oliver were with him to bounce ideas off of.

Something brushed his outstretched legs. Before he could move, two searing needles sank into his flesh. He screamed, jumped up, and kicked at whatever had struck him in the dark, but it slithered away with the slightest whisper of a sound he'd heard before in his bison form.

A rattlesnake's reedy rattle.

Janelle jumped up. "What? What is it?"

"I got bit," Ben ground out between clenched teeth. "Motherfucker, that hurts."

"What bit you?" Charlie demanded. Ben couldn't see him in the blackness, but he knew the gazelle was close.

"Snake." Ben crouched and touched his fingers to his ankle. They met warm and sticky blood, a lot of it, and the pain continued to grow. Burning through his veins. Shit. He didn't know what sort of snake Paul was, but right now, his money was on some breed of rattlesnake. Because this couldn't be random.

"Get ready," Ben told his charges. "They're coming."

"FUC?" Maggie, the house hippo, said hopefully.

"No." Ben gritted his teeth. "Paul and his thugs."

Oliver sat on the edge of the backseat of the SUV, willing the driver to go faster. Flying to the academy took too long. Getting the words out to explain what had happened took too long. Getting the strike team organized to move took *too. Damned. Long.* Once he'd relayed the message, he'd wanted to fly back to Ben, but Director Cooper would have none of it. Yes, he needed to eat and replenish his energy, but didn't she understand? Ben was out there. Alone. Well, without backup. And yeah, maybe Alyce's admonition that they didn't need to be potentially dealing with *two* injured or exhausted almost-agents was logical. Whatever. Oliver wasn't feeling the love for logic right now.

He'd pointed out where he'd left Ben and the other shifters on the map—he'd always had an excellent sense of direction and distance—and the strike team had done its research to determine the best way to get to them. There was a logging road not too far off, it turned out, which was a good thing because there wasn't anywhere they could land a helicopter. So now they were careening down a not-so-well maintained dirt road that was barely wide enough for the three SUVs in their caravan to navigate in single file.

The FUC agent riding shotgun—Oliver thought his name was Marcus—turned to glare at him. "Sit back and put your seatbelt on."

Oliver glared back and made no move to do as he said.

"Seriously, this road is—"

The driver grunted. "Damn, this is gonna *hurt!*"

The SUV hit the mother of all potholes. Oliver launched off his seat and slammed into the ceiling, letting out a loud squawk on impact. Then he bounced back down to the floor, smacking his head against the boot of the FUC agent sitting in the back seat. Wearing his seatbelt.

"Told you," the front seat agent crowed.

Oliver climbed back onto the bench and did up his belt.

Only to have the SUV skid to a stop fifteen seconds later. They could just make out the dark hulk of the dilapidated cabin in a small clearing ahead. Oliver went to grab the door handle, but the agent beside him—whatever his name was—stopped him.

“We go first.”

“But—”

“That was the agreement,” Marcus said, his eyes still on the cabin. “We’re the agents. You’re not. Got it?”

Director Cooper had said something similar when she’d allowed Oliver to accompany the strike team. And he knew that if word got back to her that he’d ignored her wishes, he’d be looking for another job. “Got it.”

The agent beside him squeezed his arm. “Good. We’ll—”

Marcus hissed him to silence as a dark-clad figure moved through the night to the front door of the cabin. “Shit!” He keyed his mic. “Okay, everyone, move!”

Oliver hunkered down in the SUV while the agents stormed through the trees to rescue the shifters in the cabin. He bit his lip as gunfire split the night.

A bison’s roar rose above it all.

Ben!

Oliver was out and moving before he even thought about it. Like the FUC agents, he wore black cargo pants, a black T-shirt, and a bulletproof vest with FUC patches on the back and front, but he didn’t have a radio in his ear. Because he wasn’t supposed to be a part of this mission.

But that was *Ben*, roaring once more. He couldn’t sit in the SUV and do nothing!

Flying around the cabin was out—the trees were too tight on either side. So that left him in human form, with all of its limitations.

And strengths.

He angled off to the side, away from the bulk of the fighting, and crouched low in the brush. Crabwalking was not easy on the thighs and glutes, good god, but there were too many twigs and forest debris clogging the ground to belly-crawl. Finally he reached the rear of the cabin. He couldn't see much in the dim moonlight filtering through the forest's canopy, but he spotted what looked like a back door.

Exactly what he'd hoped to see.

He ran over to it and pried it open, rusted nails letting go their grip on disintegrating wood without much effort on his part at all. Human shouts, animal roars, and the ping of bullets from the front of the structure covered any noise he made. He slipped through the door into what might have once been a back porch, which led into a gutted kitchen. He turned the corner—

Only to have a pair of long gazelle horns threaten to stab him in the neck.

"It's me!" he croaked. "Oliver!"

The gazelle shifted back to human form. "You came back!"

"Of course I came back," Oliver growled. He could barely see the guy in the darkness of the cabin, and he definitely couldn't see Ben's bison bulk, but he could hear him breathing. "Ben?"

A whuffle.

A shot pinged off something metallic—god knew what—and Ben grunted. Oliver and gazelle-boy dropped to the ground.

"Shit, Ben? You okay?"

"We need to get him out of here," the gazelle shifter said.

"What's your name?"

“Charlie.”

“Charlie, we’re going to get you all out of here. There’s a FUC strike team out there, taking out the bad guys.” Oliver instinctively ducked as another round hit the cabin. “Though they could move a little faster.”

“No, I mean—” Charlie bit back a curse at another shot. “Ben was bitten by a snake. A rattler. He shifted so the venom wouldn’t hit him as hard.”

Right—more blood, less percentage of venom in the blood. The act made sense in a horrifying way. “Paul—the head bad guy,” he explained for Charlie’s benefit, “must have figured he could take Ben out and then you’d all be easy pickings.”

“Except Ben shifted, got us all rounded up with him between the guns and us, and then you showed up with FUC.” Charlie let out a heavy breath. “We’re going to be okay now, right?”

I hope so. “We’re definitely going to be okay.”

If the FUC team got the bad guys. If they could get Ben out of here and to medical treatment as a bison...

It took Oliver a minute to realize the gunfire had stopped. But who had won?

“Stay here,” he whispered to Charlie and edged toward the front door. The bullet holes in the wood were a lighter shade of gray than the rest of the darkness and beckoned him forward.

“This is the Furry United Coalition! We’re here to help you. Ben Beaufort?”

Oliver breathed a sigh of relief as he recognized Marcus’s voice and pulled the front door open...only to have it fall off its hinges and clatter to the floor in a cloud of dust. He squinted at the lights being shone in his face and held up a hand to protect his eyes.

“Oliver?” Marcus shouted. The light’s angle drifted downward, and suddenly Oliver could see again. “Goddammit, Zuraw, you were supposed to wait in the—”

“Ben’s hurt.”

“Okay, we’ll come in and get—”

“No, he has to stay in his bison form. He was bitten by a rattlesnake. Paul, I guess.”

“Shit. Okay. Look—”

A whisper of a rattle grabbed Oliver’s attention. Instinct took over, and he shifted, faster than he ever had before. In the next moment, he’d speared a rattlesnake with his beak—right behind the snake’s skull. It hissed weakly, rattled again...and was still.

Oliver had never killed anything before—though whooping cranes in the wild hunted small reptiles, fish, and other small prey, he had never spent enough time in his feathered form that he’d had to hunt in it. So it was...unsettling, that he’d been able to act so decisively.

And yet, really damn satisfying. He’d gotten revenge for the attack on his bull, and that made him want to preen.

“Nice.” The FUC agent from the backseat—Oliver still didn’t know his name—gave him a nod of approval as he hopped up the steps. “I guess you can say we’ve cut off the head off this snake-y organization.”

“Or stabbed it to death, anyway,” Marcus said with a smirk. “Good job, Zuraw.”

But Oliver didn’t have any time for FUC agent praise. He raced over to Ben, bugling in distress. Ben answered with a tired-sounding, rumbling huff. Oliver purred in response, thankful that Ben was still cognizant enough to react to his presence.

Behind him, the FUC agent from the backseat said, "Hey, Marcus?"

"Yeah, Shane?"

"I think we're gonna need a bigger truck."

About one year later

Ben stood in line at the start of the rebuilt obstacle course, eying the challenges much as he'd done at the start of his time at FUCN'A. He'd changed so much—grown more confident, grown into a bison worthy of being a FUC agent—but the damned thing wasn't any less intimidating.

Probably because he'd had yet to beat it.

This was his class's last test. He'd passed everything else. Every exam, every applied scenario, everything they could throw at him—he'd conquered it all with ease. With every day that had passed, he'd felt more and more at home at FUC, both the academy and the organization as a whole.

Things had been touch and go for Ben in the first moments after he shifted back to his human form following the Paul mission. Paul's venom had worked its way through his system when he'd been in his bison form—not a problem for an animal that weighed nearly three tons, but when he changed back, suddenly his blood volume was a lot less and...well, it had been scary for a bit. Especially because Ben had taken more than a few bullets protecting the other shifters, and these ones had worked their way past his tough hide.

Oliver had been there every time Ben had woken up—and more often than not, Diana, his sister, had been as well. When he'd gotten more lucid, Oliver had gushed about how he thought Didi hung the moon, with her take-no-shit, unapologetic attitude.

It would be great to see her at his graduation party this weekend.
If he graduated.

Shit, no. Don't think that.

For this final test, the physical fitness instructor, Falk, was calling up each recruit in alphabetical order. That meant Ben was the third up, after Ulysses Ackerman and Yonda Albright. Ulysses was a rat shifter, and Yonda was a raccoon shifter. They both ran the course easily, within the time allowed, as they had been doing for months.

"Benjamin Beaufort!" There was a growl in Falk's voice as he called Ben's name, and paired with the glare he was shooting in Ben's direction, Ben got the message loud and clear.

Destroy the course at your own peril.

Ben started, the motions as familiar to him now as shifting into his bison form. Running through the tires, climbing the rope wall, belly crawling under low beams, walking across the high beam—it was all...well, not easy. His body wasn't meant to be agile and flexible, a fact he'd come to terms with months ago. But he was more flexible and more agile than he used to be, and that was what—

"Time!"

Just like every other attempt he'd made at the course, he'd come up short. Another thirty seconds, forty-five at the most, and he would have finished. His bulk slowed him, every time. He stood on the balancing beam, looking out at the crowd. He spotted Didi first, and then beside her, Oliver's platinum head of hair. Their expressions both fell as the results of the test sunk in.

You either passed all of the academy's tests, or you failed.

Ben wasn't going to be a FUC agent.

He jumped down from the balancing beam and closed his eyes, trying to envision his future. Would they let him attend the academy again? If they did, could he defeat the obstacle course? Or should he give up and try to find something else for a career? Except now that he'd been here and experienced what it was like to be part of FUC, he didn't want to do anything else. Not to mention the plans he and Oliver had made over the past few months.

At some point while Ben had been in and out of consciousness in the hospital, Director Cooper had approached Oliver with an offer. Because he'd shown himself so capable in the field, and he had partial academy training, he could apprentice with a FUC agent to learn on the job. Or he could remain a yoga instructor at the academy. The choice was his—the Avian Soaring Security had signed off on it. He'd delayed giving her an answer until Ben was awake and feeling better, so they could discuss it. Of course Ben had supported it completely, especially when Oliver said he wanted to make it a condition that once Ben graduated, they'd be partnered up. Because they made a great team, at work and outside of it.

They'd bought a house together with the idea that Ben would move in after graduation. But if he didn't graduate, would Oliver wait another year to put their plans in motion? Would FUC force him to partner with someone else?

What was he going to *do*?

"Pardon me, Instructor Falk. Before you call the next recruit."

Ben lifted his head, looking for the owner of the voice. Director Alyce Cooper stepped out from the crowd, dressed in one of her ubiquitous power suits—this one in burnt orange. She marched over to Falk, and the waiting recruits made a wide berth for her.

Falk frowned. "Director Cooper?"

Ben tentatively stepped around the balance beam and made his way closer to Falk and the director. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Didi ramming her way through the crowd, towing Oliver behind her.

"Why was Mr. Beaufort running the obstacle course?" Director Cooper asked.

"I—" Falk blinked. "I'm not sure I understand the question."

"It was a very simple question, Instructor Falk."

"He's a recruit, Director. Every recruit needs to complete this course in under two minutes before they graduate." He looked around, as though he was searching for backup, then turned back to the director. "It's in the policies."

"Yes, I'm aware." Her smile was downright frightening. "So I ask again: why did you have Mr. Beaufort run the course?"

"Because he's a recruit...who...needs to?"

"Instructor Falk, it was my understanding that Mr. Beaufort already completed the course within the allotted time."

"What? When?"

Suddenly Oliver was beside Ben, their fingers intertwining. "On September twenty-fourth," he interjected.

"September—" Falk's face turned red. "No. No. That wasn't completing the course. That was—was vandalism!"

When he'd run through the course, destroying it. It *had* taken less than two minutes. Some of the heaviness on Ben's shoulders started to lift.

Director Cooper arched a brow. "We constantly ask our students to think outside the box. To come up with new and creative solutions to a problem. This is how we prepare them for the ever-changing environment of life as a FUC agent. Mr. Beaufort took that lesson to heart. After *one week*. Some students never learn how to apply that

sort of creative problem solving. As unconventional as his solution might have been, it was effective. Benjamin Beaufort completed the course on September twenty-fourth with a time of one minute and forty-eight seconds."

"Director," Falk whined.

Director Cooper turned to Ben. "Congratulations, Mr. Beaufort. And welcome to FUC."

She held out her hand to shake his, but suddenly Ben's arms were full of excited whooping crane. Ben gave the director a rueful glance over Oliver's shoulder, and she returned it with a smirk. "We'll chat later," she mouthed.

"You passed!" Oliver shouted, as a cheer rose up from the crowd watching the spectacle. "Baby, you passed! I'm so proud of you."

Didi bumped his shoulder. "Way to go, bro."

Ben dipped his face into Oliver's shoulder and breathed in the sugary scent of his love, his partner, his mate. He'd done it—started again, found a new life, a new calling. The future stretched before him...and it was everything he never knew he wanted.

The End

NOT QUITE! There are more FUC Academy books coming each month!



To find out more about these books and more, visit Worlds.EveLanglais.com or stay in the loop with our newsletter: [sign up here](#).



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jenn Burke has loved out-of-this-world romance since she first read about heroes and heroines kicking butt and falling in love as a preteen. Now that she's an author, she couldn't be happier to bring adventure, romance, and sexy times to her readers.

She's been called a pocket-sized and puntastic Canadian on social media, and she'll happily own that label. Jenn lives just outside of Ottawa, Ontario, with her husband and two kids, plus two dogs named after video game characters...because her geekiness knows no bounds.

