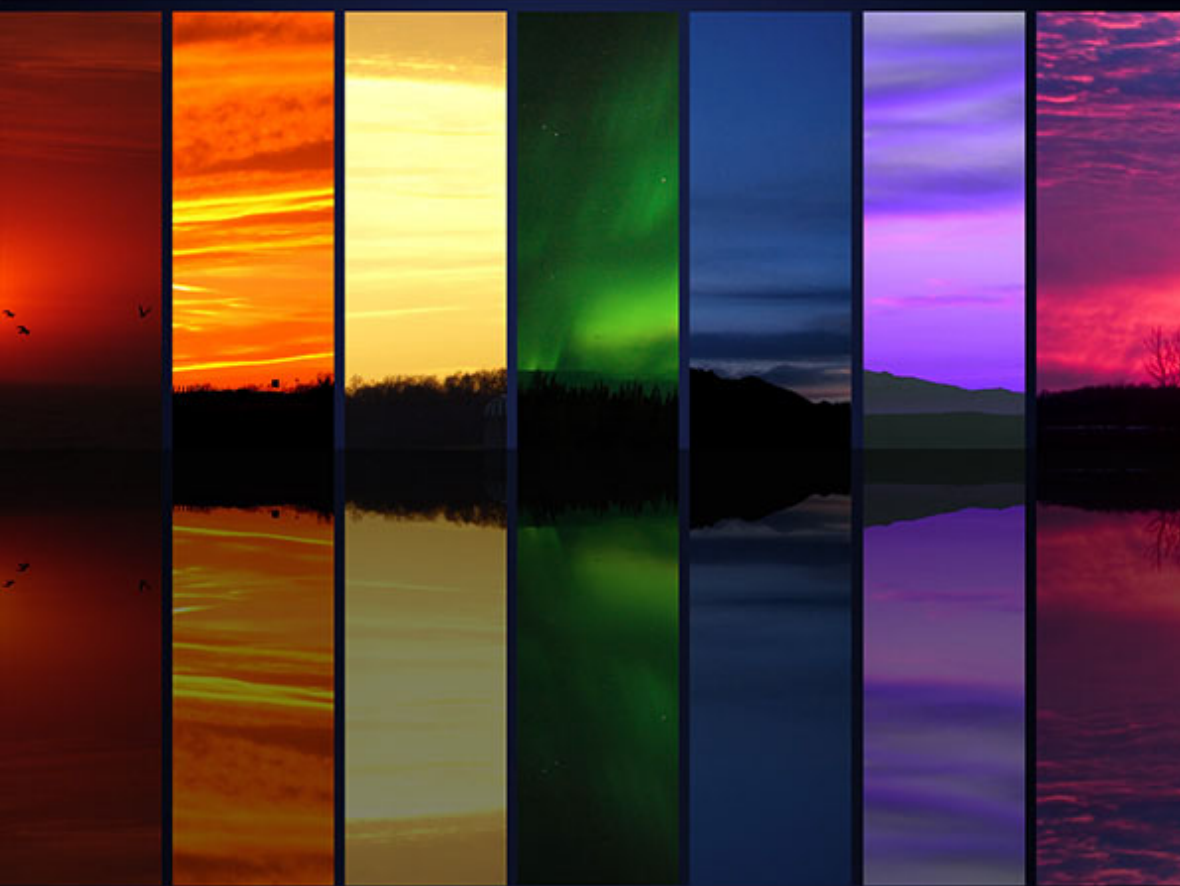


LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

LOST AND FOUND

Eileen Griffin

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

LOST AND FOUND

By Eileen Griffin

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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LOST AND FOUND

By Eileen Griffin

Photo Description

Human photos consisted of three males, two—who each have short hair and some beard scruff—in a loving embrace on their bed, and the last one who is thinner and smaller boned, pale skin with longish black hair in a thin T-shirt and low-slung off-white pants. Cat photos consisted of two long-haired Maine Coon cats with tortoise-shell coloring, and a tan and black colored smaller cat with very short hair.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

It came as no surprise to anyone when we declared our intention to live together, we'd been closer than litter mates growing up and neither of us had ever looked twice at any of the females. It makes things easier all round, gay Felis are more than welcome in the Clowder as they pose no threat to the Toms. We help out with schooling and looking after the kits, do odd jobs for everyone and look out for the safety and security of the whole clan.

About a week ago, the ruling Queen gave us a new job. To look after this young man, barely out of kitten-hood, and keep him safe. He's not from round here, which is obvious if you look. We run to heavy bone, muscle and long fur all of which is useful in the cold and rugged landscape we live in. He's different, lithe, extremely agile and totally naked! Well, when in cat form anyway. The only difference when he's human is that he sometimes wears clothes. He's opinionated, bolshy and likes the sound of his own voice—in both forms.

We aren't sure what we are keeping him safe from, but the threat is obviously very real—he's woken us with night terrors, but won't talk about them. Trouble is, whilst we keep him safe—there is no one keeping us safe from him. For years it's been just the two of us, but both of us feel more than a passing attraction for our charge. How do we deal with this difficult situation to make things right for all of us?

Thank you.

Sincerely,

K

Story Info

Genre: paranormal

Tags: acceptance, cat-shifters, civil war, hurt/comfort, loss, m/m/m

Word Count: 20,815

Dedication

A huge thank you to the Goodreads M/M Romance Group for hosting the Don't Read in the Closet event—I had a blast doing this! Also a tremendous amount of gratitude goes to Jaymi for her help with editing and Helena for giving me one more set of eyes on this work. Lastly, I want to thank Nik, my sometimes co-writer and full-time best friend. She never fails to support me in any endeavor I undertake and routinely talks me down off the ledge when I need it. I'd be lost without her.

LOST AND FOUND

By Eileen Griffin

Prologue

Tanner

The thin strip of light from the trap door barely illuminated the cramped attic crawlspace. A loud boom tore through the silence making the roof shake from the tremendous force of it.

That one was close. Too close.

For weeks, since the edict had been handed down, the two shifters had been hiding in the abandoned buildings of the warehouse district, eating nothing but scraps and going out only to seek out the most recent news they could find. Passages out were few and far between now and escape had become paramount to all else. Most knew they should have gotten out last year; hell, even last month would have been better than the risks that faced them now. Now, it was truly a do-or-die situation. Stay and face a certain bullet through the brain or escape and face a metaphoric one from starvation.

Save for the slim chance of making it across the border, the odds weren't good. But they were the only odds they had right now.

Despite the loss he had already encountered, Tanner knew they had to risk it. He had lost everyone he loved during the first wave of the purge. Since then, they had only been surviving, not living. He wasn't sure what life existed for them past the border, but he'd be damned if he at least didn't try to make a run for it.

The blue mark signaling the next passage had been posted on the lone light pole at the far end of the park two nights ago. Through sheer luck and the cover of darkness, he had made his way into the safe house and up to this attic. What should have been an appearance of two was accepted with sad resignation by the owners of the house that it was only an appearance of one. The family appeared calm as they led him through the house to this hiding place, even though he knew they were risking their own necks by aiding shifters. Whispers carried through the cracks to the attic told him enough to know this would most likely be their last attempt to help his people. They had taken too many risks already for people who were as different from them as night and day. It was something Tanner could respect, but not fully understand.

The sirens that had been so close just an hour ago seemed more distant now. With no way to see out of the attic, Tanner could only hope the patrols were

moving to the next quadrant. When he could no longer hear them, a muffled sound came from below him. Within an instant, light flooded the crawl space.

“It’s time.”

With his heart hammering loudly in his chest, Tanner crawled down the rickety old ladder and onto the second floor of the clock shop. Without another word, he was rushed down the stairs to the main floor. Through the open back door, he could see a nondescript work van waiting. It was now or never. He closed his eyes briefly and sent up a small apology to his mother that he couldn’t have done more to save their small clan, then he walked the rest of the distance to the van and jumped in. As the van began to move, he wondered whether he would end up with the real bullet or the metaphoric one at the end of this journey.

Chapter 1

Bram

Bram looked out over the fields and took a deep breath. The winter chill had finally broken and the air was already ten degrees warmer than it had been yesterday. He only had minutes to enjoy the sunrise before he had to head inside to get ready for work, but he took in everything he could about the yellow and orange rays spilling over the landscape as he stood there in the early morning hour.

The soft rustle of leaves to his left alerted him that he wasn't alone. Not wanting to give anything away, he closed his eyes and took another deep breath, giving the impression of complete relaxation. The scent that wafted across the distance to him told him more than any visual cues could. It was male and spicy, with just a hint of citrus. He leaned forward on the balls of his feet just as the footsteps paused behind him. Without any warning, he turned his body and lunged at the figure behind him.

"Oomph. Shit, Bram! Do you always have to do that?"

Bram grinned down at the man he had pinned underneath him. Damn, Ryder was handsome. No matter how many years they spent together, he seemed to get more and more desirable. Grinning wider, he slid his hands along Ryder's body, grabbed his wrists, and pinned them above his head.

"Yes, I do. Especially when you try to sneak up on me like that."

Ryder's golden eyes darkened when Bram tightened his hands around his wrists, pushing them against the ground, as he locked his knees around Ryder's hips. Before he could speak, Bram leaned down and captured Ryder's lips with his own. The resulting moan rumbling against his lips made him simultaneously aroused and pissed off that he had to be at work soon.

When they finally drew apart, Ryder's unsteady breath fanned over Bram's lips. *"We'll have to revisit this scene later. Especially your hands around my wrists because, well, that's hot. For now though, we need to get our asses in gear and get to work. I know you don't have class until noon today, but didn't you say you had meetings this morning? And I can't be late to the office. Again."*

Bram's sigh matched Ryder's, all of his arousal deflating as he thought about leaving the warmth of the body under him. He dipped his head down one

last time to brush his lips over Ryder's, then shifted his weight to sit next to his lover and best friend.

"I'm ready to go. I just wanted to catch a glimpse of the sunrise since the winter was so brutal this past year. Seems like forever since we've seen a proper sunrise or sunset."

His body shivered when Ryder's hand slipped around his waist, his fingers barely brushing the skin under Bram's shirt. Not wanting to move just yet, Bram searched for anything to keep them right here in this moment.

"What's on your agenda today? I do have some meetings, then a class at noon and another at two, but after that I'm done. Think you can knock off early today? Maybe grab a bite to eat before we head home?"

"Unfortunately, I have a long day today. The chancellors are meeting to discuss the civil war in Callatown, and I have to be present to give my thoughts on the situation. Some of the local clan leaders want us to join forces with them and intervene because they fear the unrest will spread outside Storm Clan's boundaries. Others are urging us to remain neutral for fear that involvement from neighboring clans will make the situation escalate. Basically, it's a 'damned if we do, damned if we don't' situation."

Bram's heart clenched when he watched the carefree joy of just a few moments ago bleed out of his lover's golden eyes. The situation to the south of them was getting worse week by week. He knew they were safe in the mountains, but the threat of another shifter purge against the Sky Clan, like the one during the '40s, was enough to make anyone nervous.

He wrapped his arms around Ryder's stockier frame and pulled him close. He knew they were safe, but the thought of losing the man in his arms right now caused his body to shudder. As if reading his mind, Ryder turned his head and gently brushed his lips across Bram's stubbled neck.

"I'll be home around six o'clock. Why don't I pick something up on my way home and we can eat outside before the sun goes down?"

Bram hummed in approval, dipping his head down to capture Ryder's lips. "And after the sun goes down?"

Ryder chuckled softly against Bram's lips and smiled. "That will be the thought that sustains me throughout the day." He kissed his lover one last time and pulled away. "If I don't leave now, though, I'll never leave. And then, I'll be out of a job. And as wonderful as staying here all day with you sounds, I happen to love my job almost as much as I love you."

As Bram watched Ryder turn and walk back toward their cabin, he called out, "Love you, too."

His breath caught when Ryder turned back around, his face lit up with a smile that made Bram's heart beat faster. He winked, then made his way across the yard to their cabin. Wanting just a moment longer before he left for work, he faced the sun again and closed his eyes. These eight years together had done nothing to dampen the flame that burned inside him for his mate. If he lived a hundred more years, each one would be complete if he had Ryder by his side.

With the day just beginning and the warm sun on his face, Bram could tell it was a harbinger of good things to come.

Chapter 2

Ryder

“We’ve got to do something besides just sit here and watch the atrocity unfold.”

Ryder sighed and brought out another list of statistics to add into the mix of what was already on the conference table before them. It had been going on like this for almost two hours, neither side any closer to making their case, each one citing numbers and laws that either prevented or supported their involvement. Some were even calling for an order from the Queen to close their borders to anyone outside the Sky Clan.

The Queen, Lady Estrella, stood up from her chair at the end of the table and pulled the latest findings toward her. She had remained silent the entire time, watching the proceedings with her hands steepled under her chin. Ryder was amazed at the restraint she’d shown. If he were the one in charge, he would have lost his patience an hour ago when it was evident the clan was too divided to agree on anything.

“Enough. We’ve beaten this topic into the ground and are still not getting anywhere.”

The buzz in the room quieted down immediately, all twelve sets of eyes now focused on their clan’s sole leader. Ryder had always admired her gentle leadership, but today he more than admired her calm restraint.

“The situation in Callatown is tragic. Everyone here is in agreement with that. And as much as I would love to intervene in every conflict that involves shifters—both inside and outside of our clan—our resources simply won’t allow us to do that.”

The chancellors, who had pushed for neutrality, all nodded their heads in assent with Lady Estrella’s declaration. She allowed that comment to settle, then raised the page of statistics she had picked up.

“This, however, is no common situation. As much as I don’t like to interfere with inter-clan disputes, the Storm Clan’s abuse of power against the River Clan does present a problem for us.”

A few chancellors who had been nodding only a moment ago began to

protest, to which she simply raised her hand, staring down at them until the protestations fell away.

“We will redouble our efforts to provide a safe haven for the refugees who have been able to escape the atrocities there. In addition, General Grey will be dispatched immediately to meet with the Stone Clan’s Council of Elders to offer whatever support we can give them since they are the closest clan to the affected area.”

A general sigh echoed around the room. Half were of relief, half were filled with dread over what the consequences of the regent’s actions would ultimately have on their clan.

“We will not, let me repeat, *not* wage war on another clan. However, we are no better than butchers if we allow one clan to exterminate another for what they claim to be a purge to contain their race’s purity. This has never been our way, and I refuse for us to begin now. I thank you all for your input today, but my decision is final. I’ll have Sandpaw forward the notes from today’s meeting to you all, along with any and all information about General Grey’s talks with the Stone Clan as it comes in. For now, this meeting is adjourned.”

Ryder watched as the chancellors and advisors packed up and stood to leave. The atmosphere in the room was no longer charged with passionate debate. Instead, a somber tone had taken its place, leaving the room much quieter and colder. Sky Clan hadn’t seen anything similar to the purges currently taking place in the South for almost seventy years. The threat had always been there, but the mountains surrounding their village and their peaceful ways had insulated them longer than Ryder had been alive. His head still reeled from the horror stories his grandparents had told them of their own experience during the pogroms of the ’40s, images that still haunted him even though they had only been described and not seen. He sighed and rubbed his eyes. This wasn’t the ’40s and the threat wasn’t at their doorstep. *Yet*. Time would tell how much Lady Estrella’s plan would affect them.

As he gathered his paperwork, a hand on his shoulder startled him out of his thoughts. When he turned, his gaze met the crystal blue one he had been carefully studying all afternoon.

“Lady Estrella. Did you need something before I leave?”

“Just a word before you go.”

“Of course.”

Her gaze was clear and confident. Their clan's history had been filled with strong leaders, but the one who stood by his side right now had compassion to complement her brains. As eager as he was to get home to Bram and lose himself in the comfort of his lover's embrace, to erase the statistics and grisly information they'd pored over today, he knew his regent warranted his attention more.

"What are your thoughts about today's meeting?"

Ryder sighed and placed the documents he'd just gathered up back on the table. As he sat across from his regent, he knew this conversation could go one of two ways. He could give a standard noncommittal reply and be out of this room and in Bram's arms within the hour, or, he could be honest and tell her what his gut said, damn the consequences. He rubbed his hand over his tired eyes and decided his dinner with Bram would have to wait.

"My heart tells me we should help everyone who needs it, Lady Estrella. And not just the clans to the South, but the ones on the coast who were recently hit with those awful storms, as well the ones to the West who have been struggling with full integration amongst the non-shifters. My gut, however, tells me that no matter how much we would like to help, we neither have the resources nor the time to help everyone. I know we deserve it after our own experience with the purges, but we've been lulled into a false sense of security here in the mountains. Our borders are easily protected, we've had a peaceful détente with the non-shifters for decades now, and the nearest clan is not only our ally, but our main source of information and trade."

He paused and looked down at the most recent statistics again. There had been an estimated one thousand casualties since the war between the clans began. At least another two thousand or so hurt or missing. Some of those were the refugees currently living in the shelter the Sky Clan recently erected for them, but many were lost without a trace.

"But?" His queen's voice drew his attention back to the conversation and away from the macabre statistics.

"But, we can't turn our back on those in need either. Our shelter is almost at capacity, even though their numbers have been slowing down over the past month. That said, the refugees we've taken in have been respectful and more than eager to help out around the village. Our relationship with the non-shifter community shouldn't be a problem with our current peace accords in place, and we've been more than fortunate economically to handle the influx of new mouths to feed and shelter."

He paused again and swallowed back his nerves. "My gut tells me it's a war that will only end in more bloodshed, so I fear we'll ultimately have to do something. But for right now, I think our borders should be open to any refugees who want to seek sanctuary here."

Ryder felt his tension ease a little when Lady Estrella smiled and nodded her head. "Remind me again why you haven't sought out a position as chancellor?"

He cocked his head, pretending to think about it, then chuckled. "Because I like being able to go home to a hot meal every once in a while?"

When she placed her hand on his forearm and squeezed in understanding, he knew exactly the reason he hadn't sought out a position on the advisory committee. The higher administrative jobs jaded those in office into seeing only black or white. They took a stance and dug their heels in, refusing to budge on anything but their own agenda. He could do more work behind the scenes accumulating data and research that helped his regent make the most informed decision. Yes, he loved going home at a decent time each day to Bram, but this was work he felt pride in. Work he knew he was good at.

Lady Estrella turned and looked at the clock hanging on the wall. "I've kept you long enough. I hope your meal is still hot once you finally make it home."

Ryder took that as his permission to go. He gathered his things once again and stood to leave. Before he got to the door, Lady Estrella's voice carried over his shoulder to him.

"Please tell Bram thank you for allowing me to keep you late this evening. He's lucky to have you as a partner."

Ryder turned to face her one last time, his cheeks heated with emotion. "I will, but I'm the lucky one. Have a good evening, my Queen."

Chapter 3

Tanner

The sirens were getting closer. Tanner knew it was now or never if they wanted to make a run for it. As he rounded the corner, searchlights illuminated the shattered window of what once was the local bar. Many a night, he and his friends would come here to take a break from their studies or jobs. Once or twice he'd even had to crawl home after that first drink led to two then four. Now, all that was left was a gaping hole where the tables and chairs had been. There was no Desmond at the bar waiting to give them another round. No Winston on the small wooden stage crooning out the latest lyrics he'd just written.

As much as he wanted to drop to his knees and mourn the loss of his friends, he continued to run. A hand grazed his shoulder as a figure ran past him. Finn sprinted ahead of him, pushing his legs even faster to reach the next corner before the searchlights found them.

When Tanner saw the lights sweep back down the street, his body froze. Everything seemed to go in slow motion as he watched Finn run directly into the light, his shout drowned out by the sirens blaring from the speakers attached to the roofs of the buildings.

"Nooooo! Finn!"

Ice ran through his veins as the spotlights followed Finn's progress down the street. A cry tore through Tanner's throat as he struggled not to follow after his friend. Once he heard the helicopter above, he dove against the side of the bar, his chest heaving from fear and anguish. His body contorted against the hard brick wall as the shots rang out down the street. A final guttural cry rent the night, then was silenced.

Tanner's sobs shook his frame as his stomach roiled. He dropped to his knees and held his head in his hands, screaming at the injustice of it all. They were so close. Why Finn? Why now?

The sound of boots clacking on the pavement was immediately followed by the sound of the safety being released from a gun. When he lifted his eyes, Tanner's gaze met a steely blue one. They had found him. After months of hiding, they had finally found him. He closed his eyes as the man placed the

gun to his temple. As his body shook he realized, they hadn't been close enough.

A hand on his shoulder shook him. Instinctively, he batted it away, wrapping his hand around the wrist and struggling with its owner. "Just fucking kill me and get it over with!"

"Shhh... Tanner. You're safe. It was only a dream. Shhh... You're safe here."

Tanner's eyes flew open, the lights overhead blinding him temporarily. He recoiled from the hand on his shoulder and shuffled towards the end of his bed. Before it could erupt from his mouth, he bit down on his lip and stifled the sob he felt building inside him.

As his eyes adjusted to the lights above his cot, a cool glass of water was placed in his trembling hand. Tanner chanced a quick look at the person standing by his cot. It was Arya. Again. She'd been the one to show him around the shelter when he first got here. She'd been the one to talk to him, telling him about the community's news and goings on, even though he rarely spoke a word back to her. And it was Arya who had come to him more than once to wake him from the terrible nightmares that had been plaguing him for a solid month. They always ended the same way, with a pair of cold blue eyes staring at him and a gun pressed to his temple.

He took a long drink of water before setting the glass down on the nightstand next to his cot. As grateful as he was that his passage had been successful and the Sky Clan had taken him in, he still felt lost. Even though the weather was warm, his thin clothes left him with a perpetual chill. When Arya had suggested he get new clothes from the storeroom, he'd opted for only one other pair of jeans and a thin T-shirt. It was silly, he knew this, but his clothes were all he had left from his life before. True, it hadn't been much this past year, but it was the only home he'd ever known.

"Wanna talk about it?"

Arya's voice pulled his attention back to her as she sat down on the far end of his cot. That was one thing he was more than grateful for. No one had pushed him to talk. No one had pushed him to tell what had happened during the months he lived in Callatown once the Storm Clan had declared war on the River Clan. Everyone, especially Arya, had left him to his silent grieving. His stomach knotted with guilt. This made four times this week he'd woken up screaming with nightmares. He knew he was freaking out the other refugees

staying in the shelter, but he couldn't seem to stop the ghastly images from invading his sleep, no matter what he did. A simple glance at the clock on the wall showed it was only three in the afternoon. For fuck's sake. He couldn't even take a nap without the nightmares invading his sleep.

Tanner cleared his throat and shook his head. "No, but thanks for the water."

Her green eyes reflected all the sadness he knew she felt for him, but he didn't want someone's pity. He wanted his family and friends back. He wanted the fucking war to end so the shifters weren't tearing each other to pieces because of slight differences that shouldn't even matter to anyone. He wanted to get the hell away from everyone. Being around these people only made him miss the loved ones he had lost that much more.

"Tanner—"

"Don't. I don't want your pity and I don't want to talk." With still trembling hands, he pushed up from the cot and stood beside it, hating the fact he couldn't even look Arya in the eye.

"Thank you for the water and for checking on me, but I need some air."

Before she could utter a response, he flew out of the room and through the side door that led outside. He all but ran past the children playing in the yard to the back of the property that sloped down into a ravine. Without a thought as to where he was going, he ran to the nearest tree line, his legs giving out once he was swallowed up by the giant oak trees. He leaned back against the hard bark of the closest one and fell apart, his chest heaving as the sobs finally erupted from his chest.

The tears ran freely down his face as the memories of the past year assaulted him. It was hard enough that they came at him during his waking hours, but to be held captive by them night after night while he tried to sleep was pushing him to his breaking point. Not that he slept much anymore.

At least today the room had been almost empty when his screams began. The worst was when he thrashed around during the night, awakening everyone else who shared the common sleeping area with him. Those were the times he hated the most. A full audience to his psyche's inner fuckedupness with nowhere to hide from their pitying gazes because it was the middle of the night.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed, but the tears had stopped and his breathing was still shallow but no longer ragged. To no one at all, he lifted his

head and screamed. The echoing silence made his desolation that much more pathetic.

“Pathetic! That’s what I am! A fucking basket case who can’t even move on with his life even though I made it out of that hellhole.”

His chest clenched tighter as he thought back to Finn, his mom, hell, all the people he’d lost along the way who would never have a chance to move on with their lives because they didn’t have them anymore.

The agony of it all tore through him. Before he even realized what he was doing, he scrambled to his feet and all but tore the clothes from his body. With the trees as his cover, he closed his eyes and pulled all his energy inward. The familiar snapping and stretching of bone and sinew rang in his ears as the pain of not shifting in so long caused him to drop to his knees. By the time it was all over, his normally pale skin was covered with a fine fur. He cocked his head to the side and sprinted through the forest.

Faster and faster he pushed his sorely neglected muscles, working them harder than he had in almost a year. The shelter receded in the distance with each fall of his paws. The memories of loved ones and friends cut down before their time blurred into oblivion as his instincts took over, and he ran.

Chapter 4

Bram

“All right. On my count. Three. Two. One.”

Before Bram's eyes, five teens sprinted across the field. One by one, their human forms morphed and folded in on themselves allowing their felis forms to emerge. Trotter and Ply were naturals at shifting, never once breaking their stride as their bones and muscles contorted into their feline forms. Tabitha, Grant, and Heath had stumbled, but still managed to keep from stopping completely as their bodies shifted. Their appearance mimicked that of Maine Coons—well, maybe Maine Coons on steroids. Larger than house cats, feline shifters were roughly the size of pumas once they passed the kit stage and had made the transition to full adults. Their initial coming out had been a shock, to put it mildly, for the non-shifter population. All the appearances of a simple house cat with a size that was, admittedly, intimidating.

By the time the students had reached the far end of the practice field, all five had fully shifted and were running at top speed. There was a tussle of sorts when Trotter tackled Grant to the ground, but the growls they made deep in their throats were playful instead of angry, so Bram left them to their play while he recorded their times. As a physics professor, he was always interested in the mechanics of shifting and the different range of abilities of his species. So once a week he hosted the high school students who were in the Physics II class to some practical physics in their everyday lives. Gifted and usually bored senseless with their regular classes, it gave both him and them time to have fun and learn in a more relaxed setting. It was a boost to his normal routine to see their growth and progress every week.

Progress. That seemed to be an oxymoron these days. When Ryder had finally made it home last night, he was exhausted. They'd still taken their meal outside to enjoy the warmth of the sun's dwindling rays, but instead of a romantic dinner, they had spent the majority of their time talking around mouthfuls of food.

Bram's stomach had twisted when Ryder told him about the meeting with the council of advisors and chancellors. But his heart had swelled with pride when Ryder spoke of his private meeting afterward with Lady Estrella. Ryder's insight and intelligence had often been overlooked in their society, and it was

past time their clan members appreciated just how much he brought to the table with his ability to crunch numbers and then apply them to real-world situations. Being an academic and statistician was one thing, but being a gay academic had pigeonholed them both into almost a feline-non-grata in their clan. Not that they were the only gay shifters around; but the general consensus was that a clan's strength depended a lot on the shifters' strength, ability to protect, and that ever-so-sticky quality of being able to reproduce more felis to protect the clan. All these qualities were held by a tightly prized group of Toms. Being heterosexual seemed to be the magical key to protecting their boundaries and keeping them safe.

Bram snorted at that thought before turning his attention back to his students. They were all getting into the fray now, their bodies twisting and contorting as they pounced on each other. It was fun to watch, but it would serve them well if they ever found themselves in threatening situations. He sighed as he closed his notebook of their progress. His talk with Ryder had gone deep into the night, neither one able to come up with a solution that had evaded the Queen's council for these past months.

"The problem is, we're too far removed from the situation in Callatown for most of our clan to realize its severity. So even though the threat is always present and could creep up on our doorstep any day, most of our community simply doesn't get the atrocities that are occurring between the Storm and River Clans," Ryder had told him once they had gone inside and were lying in bed together.

"But doesn't the number of refugees we've taken in recently make them realize how bad it is down there?"

Ryder had lifted up on his arm to look down at Bram, a pained expression on his face. "I'm not sure if it's that they don't realize it, or they don't want to realize it. The whole 'ignorance is bliss' mentality is a hefty one when our way of life hasn't been disturbed in almost seventy years."

"What about the ones who are pushing for us to intervene? Is that even a possibility?"

Ryder had shifted to turn off the light, then aligned his body next to Bram's before answering. "I guess that will depend on what happens when General Grey gives his assessment after meeting with the Stone Clan. If they decide to move, I can't imagine the current force we have right now will be enough."

They had spoken no more that night, each one finding comfort and strength in each other's arms. Bram's mind had twisted over everything they'd talked about for hours after Ryder had gone limp next to him, his soft snores the only break in the silence of the darkness. As he looked out over the field, his heart clenched. The Toms had a sizeable force already, but he agreed with Ryder—more would be needed if they planned to intervene in the South. And as his gaze rested on the five young shifters roughhousing at the end of the field, Bram knew just where those extra numbers would come from.

Two hours later, Bram entered his office at the university and knew something was up. Ryder, who never got off work early, was standing by his bookshelf thumbing through the copy of *Les Miserables* Ryder had given him the year before. Ryder loved to read, but the heavy classics weren't his forte, which made this unofficial visit that much more ominous.

"Babe? Is something wrong?"

Ryder set the book back on the shelf and turned to Bram. *He looks exhausted. Something had to have happened*, Bram thought to himself as his mate crossed the room and shut the office door behind them.

"Nothing's wrong. I tried to call you but the front desk said you were out on the field all day. So, I figured I'd come talk to you in person."

Bram's neck prickled as warning bells began to go off in his head. "Ryder, we promised to always be straight with each other. What's going on that is so important you left your office to come talk to me?"

"The Queen asked for us to meet her in her chambers today, so I figured I'd stop by here and we could go over there together."

Dread filled Bram's stomach as the myriad implications of those words churned in his gut. "Why does she want to meet with us?"

Before Ryder could even answer, Bram sucked in a gasp of air and locked his gaze on Ryder's. "Please tell me this has nothing to do with your talk yesterday. I know you said General Grey was taking a group of advisors with him, but you're not... you're not one of them. Are you?"

Warmth filled his body when Ryder wrapped his arms around Bram's waist and pulled them closer together. "No. I'm staying put. She said she wanted to discuss the issues we've been facing with the recent influx of refugees. That she wanted both of us there, but especially you because of your role here at the

university and because she trusts your insight into all this. Any more than that, and I haven't a clue."

A sigh of relief left Bram's body. He could give advice, help counsel someone, hell he could even tutor some of the kids at the shelter as long as it meant he and Ryder were together. For eight years they had been not only in each other's lives, but inseparable. It hadn't always been easy, but they had weathered everything life threw at them. Together.

"When does she want to meet?"

"As soon as we can. Think you can leave for a little while?"

As soon as Ryder broke the embrace to gather his things, Bram instantly wanted to pull him back against his body. He wasn't sure what the meeting was about, but a small voice in the back of his head told him it wasn't good. The Queen had never summoned them before. Ryder? Sure. She had asked for his counsel too many times to count. The both of them? Yeah, that didn't bode well.

He took one last look at his lover, then nodded. "Of course. Let's go."

As they were leaving Bram's office, Ryder brushed by him and whispered before he opened the office door, "Maybe the meeting will end early and we can head home for some appetizers before dinner."

The shivers shot straight down to his groin as he imagined the type of appetizers Ryder was referring to. He adjusted himself before shutting the office door behind him, muttering, "Let's get this show on the road then."

Chapter 5

Ryder

It had taken them less than fifteen minutes to cross the quad of the university where the Queen's chambers were. Her offices were more ostentatious than the Dean's, but since the university was centrally located in town, it seemed like the best place for her to keep her official chambers.

After a brief wait in the antechamber, Ryder and Bram were ushered into a lush high-beamed room filled with dark mahogany bookcases and turn-of-the-century furniture. They might have been living in 2014, but the entire vibe of the room screamed Victorian. Ryder loved the room with its warm burgundy and tan colors and had always loved it when Lady Estrella held small council meetings there. One look at Bram, though, told him they wouldn't be sticking around to enjoy the décor after the meeting.

Truth be told, he was more curious about the meeting than apprehensive. Their regent had always been fair and kind, thus their community had always had a more peaceful and academic lifestyle than those of the other clans. When the shifters had "come out" during the '30s, the transition from living a life in hiding to living freely in everyday society had been rough at first. Non-shifters hadn't known what to think about this new breed of "animal" in their midst and had originally gone on the warpath to eradicate them. Over time and after many peace talks, however, when non-shifters began to realize these "animals" were no less civilized than their own species, a truce was formed. The clans like the Storm Clan and River Clan who wanted to integrate more freely in their societies, tended to live near more heavily populated non-shifter communities. Clans like the Sky Clan had opted to keep to themselves, keeping to a much more sleepy college town way of life securely nestled in the mountains of West Virginia. It wasn't perfect, and there were always small skirmishes between the two species, but it was better than living a life in the closet.

A side door opened, and Lady Estrella walked in. She was not a typical beauty, with her smoky-topaz eyes and wide forehead, but her compassion and intelligence had made her one of the most beautiful people in their clan. He had never been attracted sexually to females, but he felt an attraction to her wit and spirit.

"Ryder. Bram. Thank you for coming at such short notice. I hope it wasn't a problem with your work schedules."

Ryder smiled when he saw Bram bow slightly in their regent's direction. She had dismissed all the formal greetings when she took over as regent from her mother twenty-two years ago, favoring a much more relaxed reign. But Bram, rough and tumble, ruggedly handsome Bram, had always shown deference and respect to those he deemed as worthy. And Lady Estrella definitely fit that bill for him.

“Not a problem at all. We're both at your disposal.”

She smiled at them both, capturing each of their gazes with hers before sitting down behind her massive desk.

Ryder nudged Bram toward the chairs opposite the desk and had to stifle a small chuckle at how stoically silent his partner was. If they had been alone, he would have taken Bram's hand in his and pulled him close for a reassuring kiss. But that would have to wait until after the meeting.

After a brief pause, Lady Estrella smiled and pulled a piece of paper towards her. “Let me get right down to it. After our talk yesterday, I was contacted by one of the shelter's administrators. It seems we have a small issue, and I was hoping you two could help.”

A small issue? Bram tensed beside Ryder, making his urge to reach out and grab his hand even greater.

“Of course. How can we help?”

“Several weeks ago, a refugee from River Clan made his way into the shelter. His was not an easy journey, and I'm afraid he's rather fragile. He's not a kit, but he's young, scared, and shows obvious signs of being traumatized by what he experienced. He also confirmed that the passages out of the war zone were becoming less frequent, hence the slowdown in the numbers we've been receiving lately.”

She paused and pushed the paperwork she'd been looking over toward them. “Sadly, his adjustment here has been... not as smooth as the others.”

Bram leaned forward, never once glancing at the paperwork. “Does he have any family? Friends? Other refugees that he arrived with?”

Ryder's heart surged with love for his mate. He had always had a heart that was larger than anyone Ryder knew. It was what had drawn Ryder to him all those years ago when Ryder had moved to the Sky Clan to attend the university there. When he loved, he loved with all his heart. Luckily for Ryder, that love had been bestowed on him.

“Sadly, he came alone and has not opened up to anyone since he’s been here.”

Giving in to his need to touch his mate, Ryder reached over and laced his fingers with Bram’s. “That can be rough for anyone, regardless of the age.”

Lady Estrella nodded. “It can. And that’s why I’ve called you here today. I want to ask a favor of you.”

Before he could utter a word, Bram replied, “Of course. Anything.”

Again, Ryder’s heart surged with love for this incredible man beside him.

“He needs something more than the shelter can offer him.”

Ryder opened his mouth to speak, but Lady Estrella held her hand up. “Hear me out, Ryder. He’s alone and frightened, and I fear being surrounded by people he doesn’t know or trust is exacerbating his already weak status. He’s not a Tom, or I would have asked Crimson to take him under his wing with the other Toms in training at the academy.”

Not a Tom. Then that meant...

Lady Estrella’s eyes softened as she gazed at their linked hands. “I need a safe place for him to stay for a little while that won’t overwhelm him. Some place that’s quiet but filled with love. Some place where the people he’s surrounded by will understand what it’s like not to be a Tom in a community dominated by them.”

Ryder’s heart felt like it was lodged in his throat. He and Bram had the perfect life. They rarely fought. They enjoyed the same things. They were in perfect simpatico. They had been exclusive since they first began dating eight years ago, and even though some of their friends occasionally took a third, they had never once veered outside of their twosome. What would adding another person in their house, even for just a little while, do to their relationship?

Bram leaned forward and broke the silence. “Why us?”

Lady Estrella gestured to the papers on the desk, waiting until Ryder picked them up, holding them close enough to Bram so they could read over them together.

“Tanner is twenty-four and dropped out of college to work to support him and his mom after his dad died when he was in his freshman year. He had no siblings to help out so he was the main source of income. Tragically, his mother was killed during a street bombing shortly after the Storm Clan declared open

season on the River Clan's shifters. He's alone and frightened. We would like for him to resume his studies here, but emotionally, he's not ready."

She paused and waited until both Ryder and Bram lifted their gazes to hers. "You ask why you. Ryder is one of my most respected and trustworthy advisors, even though he won't take on that role officially."

Ryder felt his face flame with the compliment from his regent.

"And you, Bram, are one of the most caring and beloved faculty members on campus. The other faculty members admire you, but more importantly, your students and former students trust you. Most of all, Tanner needs some place where he can grieve in peace without other people judging him. I will understand if it's too much to ask, but I'd like for you to at least meet him before you make your final decision."

Ryder shifted his gaze over to Bram, his mind swirling in confusion. His gaze sent the unspoken question, "*Can we do this? Do you want to do this?*"

Bram's silent nod was all the confirmation he needed. Lady Estrella got up from her desk and walked over to the same side door she had entered. A moment later she reentered the room, followed by a striking young man.

His skin was pale, almost porcelain in color, with a mane of dark, shoulder-length hair that swept over his right eye. His clothes were decidedly not from their area. In fact, he looked as if he had just left an alternative music concert rather than a refugee shelter. But when Ryder's gaze raked over him more closely as he huddled close to the doorway, he could see the refugee hiding inside Tanner. His emerald-green eyes held hidden horrors. The slight tremble of his hand as he wrapped his arms around his waist screamed his insecurities louder than anything verbal could have.

"Tanner? This is Bram and Ryder."

Ryder's chest constricted when a barely audible "Hey" was uttered from Tanner's lips. War had many casualties, not just those who lost their lives.

"Nice to meet you Tanner. Lady Estrella? Could Ryder and I have a moment alone?"

"Of course. Take your time."

Ryder's head whipped around to Bram. Just as quickly as they had entered the room, Lady Estrella and Tanner left.

"Bram—"

“Ryder. I love you. And you know how much I love our life. But I think we should do this. He’s in pain and he’s alone. And heaven knows we have the space.”

Ryder nodded. All that was true, but another person in their house? Another person who obviously needed so much more than just a roof over his head?

“We can do this. I know we can. It’s just that... when I saw him, all I could think about is what if that had been one of us? Losing everything we have with no one to look out for us.”

He paused and stood up, reaching for Ryder’s hand to pull him up against his body, and embraced Ryder. “We can do this.”

Ryder was helpless against Bram when he was like this. Truth be told, it was one of the reasons he had fallen in love with him. Bram had a heart that was bigger than anyone else he knew. For this reason alone, he felt luckier than anyone else alive.

With a simple nod of his head and a gentle kiss on Bram’s lips, he smiled then pulled away to turn his attention to the closed side door.

“Lady Estrella?”

Chapter 6

Tanner

As he looked around his new “home”, Tanner felt like a loser. The small cabin was nice with its wood floors and simple wooden furniture, but it screamed cozy. It screamed domestic. It screamed family. Pathetically, he fit in with none of those descriptions.

Bram and Ryder, his new keepers, had met him back at the shelter so he could gather up his few meager belongings and then had driven him back here. To their home. During the entire car ride, he had wanted to scream at the farce of it all. Lady Estrella had assured him his nightmares and constant disruption in the other refugees’ lives had nothing to do with the new arrangement. She claimed it was a better fit for him. She claimed the two men were wonderful and would look after him while he got his feet wet in their community. She claimed he would be happy there. Instead of replying outwardly, he had raged and shouted inside the confines of his own fucked-up head that her claims were just a nice way of saying, “You’re simply too fucked up to be at the shelter, Tanner, and so we’ve found a nice place to hide you away for a while so you don’t freak out the other nice people staying there.”

“And this will be your room.” Tanner shifted his attention from his own dark thoughts to the man standing beside him. Ryder was taller than he was, hell they both were, but Bram’s frame was leaner and more wiry than his mate’s. He had the faint trace of scruff on his jaw with a gentleness about his eyes. But there was also a shrewdness there that indicated he was taking in everything Tanner did. And wasn’t that lovely to be under a microscope in a house where he felt every inch the interloper?

“Thanks.” That was all Tanner could muster. What did they expect him to say? Did they want him to rush into their arms and wax poetically about how lucky he was they were taking pity on him and giving him room and board? Not going to happen.

“We’re both early risers, so we’ll try not to wake you when we get up to go to work. I have some days I can fiddle with for some time off, but otherwise, we want you to make yourself comfortable. There’s food in the fridge if you get hungry and a field behind the house with a spectacular view of the mountains.”

Tanner shifted his gaze to Bram. He was taller than Ryder and broader with more muscle on him. He had explained on the car ride over that he worked as a

physics professor at the university, but he looked like he belonged on the football field more than he belonged in a classroom explaining the laws of gravity and shit.

“Thanks.” Again. What was he supposed to say? *Oh, a mountain view just for me to enjoy? Shucks. You shouldn't have.*

“We'll give you some time to get settled, then we'll have dinner. I'm sorry that we only have leftovers tonight. Bram makes a mean pot of spaghetti, so it's still a treat, but maybe we'll go out for something tomorrow night.”

“Yeah.” Before he could hear another syllable of their pity, Tanner entered the room and closed the door. He knew he was being a dick, but right now he really didn't give a shit. Homeless in a home where he felt like an outsider. It was obvious the two men were a couple. He didn't need his gaydar to confirm that for him. Two grown single men living together who stole shared glances to silently communicate with each other? Yeah. Even the faultiest of gaydars would have picked up on that one.

Which begged the question—is that why he was here? Because he was gay? Because the only place for a fucked up, screaming in the middle of the night gay guy was a cabin with two other gay guys and nothing but the mountains to hear his screams?

He sighed and looked out the lone window in the room. Mountains. He shivered just looking at them, even though it was spring and the room wasn't chilly. He knew he should change into something heavier, something to keep the mountain air from penetrating deep into his skin during the crisp morning hours and downright brutally cold nights. But again, he couldn't part with the one thing that made him a member of the River Clan.

He laughed bitterly at that thought. Within a month, there would be no more River Clan. Not if the Storm Clan had anything to say about it. A dispute between the two clans had turned into an all-out war, complete with an agenda to ethnically cleanse the entire South of all River shifters. And what would that give them? Bragging rights? More land to spread their own clan out on? The satisfaction of wiping another group out of existence?

The more Tanner thought about it all, the more pissed off he became. The four walls of the room began to close in around him, choking him of the ability to breathe normally. Without a second thought, he threw open the door and all but ran for the front door.

“Tanner? Where are you—”

The last thing Tanner heard before he leaped off the front porch and started running was the deep rumble of Bram's voice. "Leave him. He needs space."

He sprinted around the house to the field Bram and Ryder had so lovingly told him about and made his way to the closest tree. His clothes were shed in no time and soon he was running at full speed, his body shifting into his feline form without ever breaking his stride. This was his saving grace. This was the form he could lose himself in while his mind raged and screamed against the images that held him hostage. As the cabin fell further and further behind him, a feral cry escaped Tanner's lips as he pushed his limbs even harder to put as much distance between himself and his new "home" as he could.

Chapter 7

Bram

The bloodcurdling cry filled the house and had Bram up and running before he could even form a coherent thought. When he reached the closed door, he waited only a second before the screaming started up again, making his decision to enter the room easier.

With only the moonlight filtering through the window, Bram could see Tanner's body thrashing about in his bed, the covers twisting over and around his limbs. Leave or go? Tanner had only been here a few days and most of those were spent with either Bram and Ryder at work or Tanner outside on his own, so he really didn't feel they had enough of a relationship between them yet to go to him. But a tormented soul was never a good thing to leave alone.

Throwing caution to the wind, he quickly strode into the room and sat down on the edge of the bed, his hand trying to find a place to touch that wasn't in the midst of the flurry of movement.

"Tanner. Hey. Tanner. It's okay. It's only a dream. You're safe. It's only a dream."

The thrashing slowed down as Bram watched the haze of sleep fall away. When he opened his eyes, Tanner recoiled from Bram's touch, his back flat against the headboard of the bed.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. You were having a bad dream."

Bram wanted to smack himself. As if Tanner didn't know he was having a nightmare. Fucking hell. If this was any indication of what his dreams were like, his experience over the past year in Callatown must have been hell.

Tanner kept his eyes down and scooted further away, but Bram could see his body still trembling. Stay or leave? Even though he wanted to offer what little comfort he could, it had to be Tanner's decision to bridge the gap between them and let down his guard enough to trust they were only here to help.

"I know you don't know us or probably even want me in here, but we're just down the hall."

He was halfway across the room when a small voice carried over his shoulder. "Can you... Shit. The nightmares suck ass. Can you stay... for just a minute until I can get my fucking heart to stop beating out of my chest?"

The sigh that left Bram's lips was one of relief. He turned and nodded, making his way back to the bed as casually as he could. It was hard enough to ask for help from people you trusted, but to ask someone you've just met to help you through the sick stuff Tanner had gone through took balls of steel.

He sat on the edge of the bed, his back against the headboard next to Tanner's. "I won't push, but if you ever want to talk about it, we're here."

The small nod in the darkness tugged at his heart as they sat there, side by side, in silence. Thirty minutes must have gone by before Tanner's body calmed enough for him to shift down in the bed. Bram thought about getting up to allow him some peace alone, but then Tanner turned, his face and body mere inches from Bram's body.

Instinctively, he reached out his hand and ran it gently over Tanner's hair. The answering sigh he heard conveyed more to Bram than anything Tanner could have verbalized. With gentle caresses, he ran his hand through Tanner's thick black hair, grateful the first hurdle between them had finally been crossed.

When he heard a sound by the door, he looked up and into the eyes of Ryder standing in the doorway. It was hard to make out his expression, but he made no sound or any movement to enter the room. He just stood there and watched as Bram raked his fingers through Tanner's hair over and over.

Once Tanner's breaths had evened out and his body was finally still beside Bram, he carefully eased off the bed and met his lover at the door. Without a word spoken between them, Bram took Ryder's hand in his own and led him back to their bedroom. He left the door cracked in case Tanner had another nightmare, but once they made their way to their bed, Bram's mouth was on his lover's.

He'd never felt the kind of loneliness and ache that Tanner was obviously feeling, and he attributed that not only to his life with the peaceful Sky Clan but also to his life with Ryder. Need poured from him as he fused their mouths together, his tongue gliding over Ryder's lips as he sought entrance.

An answering moan was all it took for Bram to slide inside Ryder's mouth. His hands gripped Ryder's hips and guided him back against the bed, carefully laying him down on the mattress as Bram knelt over him. Ryder's head shot back, breaking the kiss. When Bram arched his hips forward, the friction of their cocks together drove his need higher.

He leaned forward again and trailed kisses along Ryder's jaw to his neck. At each interval, he paused to murmur to his lover. "I love you. More than you'll ever know, I love you."

Ryder writhed under him as their bodies rocked against each other. A shiver ran down Bram's spine when he felt Ryder's hands slip under his shirt and tug at it. Hovering over Ryder, Bram took his hands off Ryder's feverishly hot skin and pulled his shirt over his head. Next came Ryder's shirt, and soon both men had divested themselves of their boxer shorts. Ryder shifted higher on the bed, pulling Bram back down over him.

As Bram looked down at him, he swallowed hard at how incredibly lucky he was. Ryder was intelligent, caring, handsome, and his. He couldn't imagine losing him to some war-crazy clan bent on destroying those they deemed unfit. An image of Ryder's body bloody and twisted in some macabre pose after being destroyed for simply being different flashed in his mind. His stomach roiled just thinking about it. A gentle hand on his cheek halted the horrifying images.

"Be here with me."

Bram shook the images from his head and nodded, slanting his mouth over Ryder's again just as the words "I love you" left Ryder's lips.

He shifted his weight and reached into their bedside table, setting the small bottle of lube he withdrew next to them on the bed. With a hungry kiss, Bram lowered himself completely on top of Ryder, running his hands possessively over his body. Pouring every ounce of emotion he could into that kiss, he began to arch his hips forward. As their cocks slid along each other, Ryder's pants for breath matched his own. Hands sought any inch of free skin they could find as they pulled and tugged at each other in their frantic grinding.

When Bram felt Ryder arch up higher, he slipped his hand between them, his fingers skimming over Ryder's hard length and down to his balls. Nothing existed in this moment except the two of them. Their problems and the problems of the world would wait for them. Right now, it was just the two of them losing themselves in the comfort and security of each other's bodies.

Ryder writhed under him as Bram's fingers moved lower, his fingers gently pressing against the hole there. Needing more room, he rose and knelt between Ryder's legs. Wasting no more time, he poured some lube into his palm, then drizzled some over the cock that was lying heavy and thick against Ryder's abs. There were no words for how much he loved the man underneath him right now. No words that could express how much he loved him, but more so, how much he needed him. Feeling his heart expand even more, he slammed his mouth over Ryder's again, palming and lubing his erection between them. Time

slowed as they finally broke the kiss, both breathing hard and out of breath as Bram ran his slickened palm over Ryder's length. Bram knelt there, watching his lover arch and writhe under him while he stroked his cock.

"Please, Bram. I need more of you tonight. I need to feel you moving inside me."

The urgent plea took Bram's breath away and without another thought, his hand was on the lube bottle again. His slick fingers were pushing, stretching, twisting inside Ryder's tight hole. When Ryder's body began to shake under him, Bram slid the fingers out and guided his cock to Ryder's entrance, slowly pushing inside him. Even though they had a healthy and active sex life, the tightness he felt whenever he first entered Ryder never failed to take his breath away. Once he was fully seated inside Ryder's body, Bram began the torturous dance they both loved so much. A slow slide and pull of his body as his cock entered and withdrew from Ryder's warm channel. Over and over again he pumped his hips until he felt the sweat drip down from his temple to his jaw.

When he saw Ryder's hand slip between him and over his cock, Bram knew he wouldn't last much longer. They locked gazes and Ryder clenched around Bram's cock, the pressure and friction causing him to cry out in pleasure, and he slammed his hips back down in response. With an almost guttural cry, Ryder tensed then shuddered under Bram, a warm wetness pooling between them. The sight of Ryder losing it under him sent him over the edge, his cock pulsing as he threw his head back and felt his orgasm rip through him. With his body still trembling with the aftershocks of his release, he collapsed on top of Ryder, his muscles loose and relaxed for the first time in days.

They lay there for a few minutes in the darkness, their labored breathing the only sound in the room. A creak of a floorboard in the hallway outside their room caught Bram's attention, but when he turned and strained to hear more, his ears were met with silence.

He turned back to Ryder, whose eyes were still closed, and kissed him softly. He felt rather than saw the smile that spread across his lover's face. When he pulled out of Ryder's body, the man he fell in love with all those years ago beamed back at him.

"That, was nice."

Bram chuckled and nipped at Ryder's lower lip. "Just nice?"

Ryder brought his hand once again up to Bram's cheek and nodded. "Very nice."

Reluctantly, Bram pulled back and shuffled off the bed to get a towel from the bathroom. Once they were clean and clothed again, Bram pulled Ryder against him and kissed his temple. "All I could think about while I was in there was how far gone I'd be if I lost you the way Tanner has lost the people he loved."

Ryder tried to shush him, but he pulled back so he could look Ryder in the eyes. "No, I'm serious. I can't imagine ever losing you. And to have it be in some senseless war? I'd be batshit crazy by the end of the week."

With a gentle kiss placed over Bram's heart, Ryder smiled sadly. "So would I."

As soon as Ryder settled back against Bram's side, Bram ran his fingers through Ryder's hair and thought back to being in Tanner's room. "He just needs someone, Ryder. He just needs someone to understand him and actually be there when he wakes up the next day."

Bram felt Ryder's sigh fan across his skin. "I know Bram. I know."

Chapter 8

Tanner

Tanner stood with his back pressed against the door, his heart hammering in his chest. *Holy fuck*. That was one of the hottest things he'd ever seen. He'd had his own experiences with sex, and he'd watched porn. Who hadn't? But the connection. The love. The passion. Yeah, that's what had made him stand at the door, unable to make his feet move and walk back to his room.

His one and only serious relationship was during his freshman year of college. There was a lot of sex, but at the end of the day, both he and Haven just hadn't had enough between them to keep it going once he had quit school and gone home to help his mom out. After that, his few encounters with sex were hasty one-night stands that were good at the time, but left him feeling empty once it was over.

He finally made his way over to his bed and sat down, his heart still pounding. Once his breathing and body had finally calmed down enough for him to relax, he settled deeper under the covers, still awake but more in control of himself. Most times he hated it when people tried to comfort him, but Bram's presence had been soothing, allowing him, for even a brief amount of time, to lean on someone else while he felt like his world was falling apart.

Once he'd calmed down from the nightmare, he'd tried to go to sleep. The shift of the bed had told him Bram was leaving, but the words Tanner wanted to say were lodged in his throat. Losing everyone he loved made it all but impossible for him to say those two simple words, "thank you," for fear of building one more connection that would surely be stripped from him in the end. But Bram and Ryder had been nothing but caring since Tanner had arrived and it seemed ungrateful to let Bram's presence in his room tonight slide by without a second thought.

After a minute of debating it, Tanner had slipped out of bed and made his way down the hallway to Bram and Ryder's room. With his hand poised to knock, he had heard the first moan carry through the crack in the door. His entire body had frozen as his brain registered what kind of moan it was. Through the small opening, Tanner had watched as the two men collided with each other, need and lust rolling off them in powerful waves. Peppered in between the moans were murmurs of love and need, all the things Tanner had

been missing so desperately in his life since his father had passed away and his life became consumed with work, and later, the war.

Unable to move, Tanner had stood at the door and watched as they finally climaxed in each other's arms, his own body reacting to the scene as all his blood traveled south. When the silence in the room stretched for several minutes, Tanner had slowly backed away, internally cursing the creaky floorboard under his feet as he made his way back down the hallway to his own room.

Even now, his mind still reeled with the images and sounds he'd seen, his erection tenting the sleep pants he was in. If he were alone, he might have taken the edge off with a quick self-love session, but even the thought of being alone to take care of his needs made his hard-on begin to deflate.

The connection Bram and Ryder shared, the passion and need, that's what Tanner wanted. He'd been alone for so long now that having someone to care about was as foreign as it was seemingly unattainable. Yes Finn had been his best friend, but Tanner wanted more. He wanted to find that easy place in a relationship where no words were needed, where just a simple glance spoke volumes.

As soon as those thoughts entered his head, they left and were replaced by an aching bitterness in his gut. "Fuck this."

He didn't need anyone to care about him, and he didn't need the extra baggage of worrying about someone else right now. He had shit to sort out and once it was, he'd be out of this house and away from scenes like he'd just witnessed. Before he knew what he was doing, he'd stripped his clothes off and opened the solitary window in his room. The moment his feet touched the cold, damp grass he took off running.

With the adrenaline flowing freely in his system again, his body shifted into the form he felt most comfortable with these days. While he was in his feline form, the world and all of its fucked up problems faded away. Maybe he'd stay like this. He'd heard rumors of clans further west who rarely ever shifted to their human forms, instead, opting to live as the felines they were.

As his mind raged and his thoughts screamed their pain, he pushed his paws harder against the ground, putting as much distance as he could between the two men and himself.

The next two weeks passed the same way the first few days had. Tanner stayed in bed until he heard the telltale snick of the lock turning in the front door, and then he was out the door and roaming the land behind the cabin until dusk had settled across the mountains. He ate in silence in the empty house or in the middle of the night, once Bram and Ryder had gone to bed. The weekends presented him another problem with both men being home, but he had handled that by shifting and roaming the mountainside behind their cabin, leaving early in the morning and returning well after darkness fell.

The only deviation from this routine was during the few late night hours when he passed out from exhaustion. The nightmares came relentlessly, often resulting in him screaming and thrashing about like a preschooler. Those were the only times he permitted contact with Bram and Ryder. Against his better judgment that it was better to be alone than to allow another person into his life and heart, it was those moments when his heart was pounding and his mind was racing that he craved the comfort of another person. They alternated coming into his room, probably both exhausted from getting up with him in the middle of the night, but neither one pushed him to talk. Neither one had pushed him to do much of anything, basically giving him free rein of the house when they weren't there and allowing for his frequent disappearances without an inquisition of where he'd been or what he had been doing. He knew this situation was becoming dangerous, however, because a part of him more than craved those late night strokes of his hair, back, and arms. He had promised himself not to get involved with anyone, knowing all too well the sting of loss when, purposely or by fate's sick sense of humor, they left him forever. But the touches, the soft pets, the tenderness both men had shown him struck him deep in his core. The fact they were a happily committed couple made it all that much more painful when they left his room after he had calmed down. He knew they left to wrap themselves in each other's arms, while he remained in his room, alone.

This had been the pattern of behavior they had kept up, until Saturday arrived. Keeping his eyes still closed, he heard the rain as it pattered against the roof above him, almost lulling him back to sleep. Tanner lay in bed waiting for the sound of feet shuffling and doors closing, but they never came. When he finally heard voices carry under his doorframe, he smacked himself in the head with his hand, the dawning realization it was the weekend finally hitting him.

“Fuck.”

He turned his head toward the window, his gut churning with dread. He could hop through it now and spend the day on the mountain. Even though he'd

searched and hunted the area surrounding them, there were still miles of undiscovered land he could lose himself in to avoid coming face to face with Bram and Ryder.

The rain, however, had a different agenda for him. He had no real aversion to being out in the wet, but even in his feline form, he was smaller than average and he knew the cold would eventually work its way into his bones, making the hours almost unbearable.

“Fuck...”

Stay or run? A little voice inside Tanner's head told him to suck up the frigid elements and get the hell out of the house, but an equally small and quiet voice told him he was not only being an ass, but a coward for running from two men who had yet to mistreat him. Tanner was a lot of things—fucked up and alone came to mind—but he wasn't a coward.

Steeling his resolve, he threw off the covers and pulled on the outfit he'd arrived to the Sky Clan in. With a final grit of his teeth, he opened the door and instantly began salivating. The smell of bacon and eggs assaulted him, making his stomach growl in response. During his self-imposed isolation, Tanner hadn't once sat down to a hot meal with Bram and Ryder. He sucked at cooking, so cold sandwiches and things he could easily scarf down with very little thought as to their preparation had been the sole extent of his meals this week. The mouth-watering smells that were now filling his senses were too much for him to ignore as he felt his body being pulled toward the kitchen.

Two sets of eyes turned to greet him when he crossed the threshold. One set a deep shade of grey, the other an almost blinding golden hue.

“Hungry?”

Tanner nodded at Ryder, but found himself rooted to his spot in the doorway. He wanted to scream, “*Why in the fuck are you being so nice to me?*” but he kept his lips tightly shut.

Bram scooped out a heaping portion of food on each plate before handing one to Ryder, bringing the other two to the table himself.

“Coffee? Juice?”

“Cof—” Tanner cleared the held-back rant from his throat and slowly moved over to the counter. “I'll get some coffee. Thanks.”

As he reached for a clean mug, he heard the scraping of chairs on the floor as the two men sat at the table. Maybe he could claim he wasn't feeling well.

Maybe that would be enough of an excuse to carry his plate back to his room so he could eat in silence. *Get a fucking grip. You're not some pathetic loser who has to hide in a room all day. Eat and then you can go have your pity party.*

He filled his mug with coffee and joined Bram and Ryder at the table, almost inhaling his food at once, moaning at the first hot meal he'd had in two weeks. His cheeks warmed when he heard a chuckle next to him, but kept his attention focused on his plate.

"So whatever happened with that experiment Drake wanted you to help with?"

"We're having a meeting about it on Monday. I think..."

Tanner tuned them out while he finished his breakfast. When he had scraped his plate clean, he was tempted to ask for seconds, but that would mean interrupting the conversation still going on at the table and he didn't want to miss his opportunity to make a clean getaway before they turned their focus back on him.

Without losing another minute, his plate and mug were deposited in the sink and he was halfway across the room before he stopped, his eyes still focused forward. "Thanks for the breakfast. I'll be in my room if you need me."

Tanner didn't wait for them to answer. He knew he was being chickenshit, but being around two people so obviously in love made it next to impossible for him to be in the same room with them.

When he got to his room, he stripped his clothes off to his boxers and crawled back into bed. The sheets felt cold against his skin as he scooted deep under them. As he closed his eyes, images of Bram and Ryder in bed together flashed through his mind. They'd been nothing but nice to him and a part of him yearned to be near that kind of love. But it wasn't for him. None of it was for him.

Chapter 9

Ryder

Ryder watched Tanner leave the kitchen and sighed. “Do you think we should try to talk to him? It’s been what, two weeks?”

Bram’s hand felt warm and reassuring when he placed it on top of Ryder’s. “I think he just needs some time to sort it all out. He’ll talk when he’s ready.”

“But—”

Bram’s deep grey eyes locked on his, the squeeze of his hand stopping Ryder midthought. “If his nightmares are any indication of what he’s seen, he just needs time.”

Ryder’s heart hurt for the young man, but deep inside he knew his partner was right. They’d heard Tanner thrashing in his sleep several times, evidence that first nightmare wasn’t a one-time ordeal, but none of them had been as bad as that first one. They had taken turns going to Tanner’s room to wake him up and comfort him, but Tanner never opened up and talked about the terrible dreams that plagued him. They would stay until he was calmed down enough to go back to sleep, crawling back in bed with each other to find their own comfort in each other’s arms, each one thankful for the man lying beside him. But each morning, the urge grew for him to go and comfort, help, shit... do anything that seemed more productive than just waking him up from his nightmare.

Before Tanner ever came to live with them, he thought he’d feel some form of jealousy or anger if he ever saw his mate with another man in a bed in the middle of the night. But when he watched Bram with Tanner that first night, his heart had swelled from not only pride in his mate, but love for the broken man in that room. The contented sighs that carried to him at the doorway whenever Bram ran his fingers through Tanner’s hair or down his back pierced him. How alone did someone have to be for them to be that starved for touch?

He leaned in his chair to brush his lips across Bram’s temple and nodded. “Since it’s raining, how about you get a movie queued up while I clean up the kitchen?”

“Sounds like a plan.” Bram got up from the table and hovered in the doorway. “And who knows? Maybe a movie day is exactly what Tanner needs to pull him out of that room and into the land of the living again.”

Ryder's heart clenched and he thought, *With any luck.*

Two hours later, the battle between the orcs and the elves was interrupted by bloodcurdling screams. At first, Ryder thought it was just another one of the actors on the screen, until Bram's finger hit the mute button on the remote control and the screams continued.

Together, they flew off the sofa and tore down the hallway to Tanner's room. Ryder entered first, the sight before him making his blood run cold. Tanner thrashed in his bed, his almost naked body drenched in sweat. Ryder momentarily froze as Tanner's moans and guttural cries hit him like a punch in the gut. But when he didn't wake up, he crossed the room without even thinking and sat on the bed.

"Tanner. Tanner! It's just a dream. Wake up, buddy. It's just a dream."

When Tanner's eyes flew open, Ryder took in a breath at the depth of desperation that shone in them. With careful movements, he lifted his hand and brushed back Tanner's hair from his sweaty brow, leaving it there as Tanner trembled under his palm. There was a momentary flash of embarrassment probably from both the dream and his current state of undress, then he closed his eyes as if trying to hide from his audience.

Ryder heard then saw Bram move closer to the bed, sitting down on the opposite side. They locked gazes for a brief moment, each conveying to the other how much it broke their hearts to see anyone in this much pain. A silent understanding passed between them as they both moved to sit at the head of the bed, their hands in a synchronized dance of movement through Tanner's hair.

After what felt like an eternity, Tanner's soft, broken voice cut through the silence. "I watched both of them die." He chuckled darkly, then cleared his throat, his voice still laden with sadness but stronger. "Hell, I watched a lot of people die, but I watched both of them die right before my eyes."

Ryder's heart broke when the words finally registered. Thankfully, Bram's voice worked better than his, and his heart surged with love for both of these men when he heard his lover ask, "Wanna talk about it? You don't have to, but we're here if you want to."

A long moment passed—so long that Ryder thought Tanner was going to clam up again and shut them out. He felt a small tremor roll through Tanner's body, then let his breath out in relief when Tanner began to talk.

“When the war first began, my mom thought we could still live life normally. She used to tell me that if we changed how we lived, then the Storm Clan would have already won. It was just her and me, so I went into town with her while she shopped. She only had one more errand, for fuck’s sake. It was to buy some fucking thread so she could fix one of my shirts, so I told her I’d go check across the street at the fishmonger to see what kind of specials he had that we could afford while she got what she needed. I had barely made it halfway across the road when the explosion went off. Dust and debris went flying. But that wasn’t the worst part.”

Tears shone in Tanner’s eyes as he paused and swallowed hard. “No, the worst part was what came after the explosion. Over the sound of the fire and crackling glass, were screams. Shrieks and moans that carried out of the shop and down the street. The blast was so strong it knocked me off my feet and against the window display of the fishmonger’s shop. I ran at top speed to get to the building but the smoke and fire were simply too much. Hours later, the fire department said the few bodies that weren’t completely destroyed from the blast were in too bad of shape for on-site identifications. And even though I knew she hadn’t survived, I had to wait days for the final confirmation that she was dead. News reports said Storm Clan rebels had claimed responsibility for the bomb, vowing to increase their quest to purge the River District of all remaining River Clan shifters.”

Ryder’s hand had stilled in Tanner’s hair, his stomach churning as he thought about Tanner’s mom. What kind of cruel world did they live in where this kind of thing was deemed acceptable? To his credit, Bram’s hand never once stopped moving. Ryder looked down at Tanner and never felt as helpless as he did at that very moment. His body was still trembling and his eyes were closed, but tears had begun to fall down his face and on the sheets under him.

“Then there was Finn. We were like brothers, growing up together all throughout school. He’d already lost his parents to a ‘home invasion from unknown assailants’ the year before the war broke out, so he moved in with me since neither of us wanted to be alone. Then Mom died and we were really alone. We kept to ourselves and barely went out except to get food or supplies we needed. It sucked, but at least we were alive. Then Finn saw the sign for a passage. We had missed the other opportunities, and knew if we missed that one, we’d be as good as dead by the end of the month.”

Tanner paused, the tears flowing freely. When he began again, his voice was still broken but there was no anger to it now. “We were almost to the safe

house. Only one turn to go and we would have made it free and clear. Finn had always kicked my ass in sports at school and was easily a hundred feet ahead of me when he turned onto the main street. There were the normal spotlights out to catch the stupid fucks like us who were trying to make a break for it, but they hadn't found us yet. Until he rounded the corner. I heard the shots before I saw them. They had to have had a patrol guarding possible locations for the safe houses. Either way, the moment he turned the corner, they saw him. The bullets ripped through his body as they gunned him down in the middle of the street."

He turned to Bram, his eyes sad and pleading. "I wanted to go to him. I wanted to be there for his last moments, but I couldn't. If I had, I knew they would have shot me too. So I took a different street and kept running."

Tanner's sob finally took over as he turned and curled his body closer to Bram. "I ran until I reached the safe house. But I should have been there. For both of them, I should have been there."

"Shhh..." Bram shifted his body closer and enveloped Tanner in his strong arms with only the thin top sheet separating them. Ryder watched as Bram murmured over and over about how he couldn't save either one of them, but he could live for them. Throughout it all, Tanner's body shook violently as the sobs racked his body. Seeing them together like this should have made Ryder jealous. It should have had him storming out of the room to call the Queen to find somewhere else for Tanner to go. Instead, it tugged at his heart and made him realize that he wanted Tanner there. It felt right and even more, it felt natural. He would never forsake Bram, but he also couldn't deny that Tanner had found a place in his heart that he wasn't sure what to do about.

Ryder mimicked Bram's position, and together they held the anguished man between them, their hands finding each other's over his body as they gave him the only thing they could—their comfort.

Chapter 10

Bram

Bram's shoulder was killing him, but he refused to move his arm from under Tanner's body. It had taken almost half an hour for Tanner to get the last of his emotions out and fall back asleep, his body falling limp between him and Ryder.

He knew from the open window they often saw when they went to check on him during the stillness of the night that Tanner had been shifting and running at night to escape his demons. And from the look of him right now, he had been running on little or no sleep for days. It made sense, now that Tanner had allowed them inside his nightmares. Why would someone ever go to sleep if all they saw was the death of your loved ones playing on a loop with no way to stop it?

As Tanner slept, Bram and Ryder had kept their gazes locked on each other. Bram knew a piece of his heart had opened up during Tanner's first night in the house when he'd soothed him after his nightmare. Ryder was his one true love and Bram would never do anything to wreck what they had, but there was something about Tanner that had pierced his heart and wouldn't let go.

A subtle shift caused Bram's eyes to turn back to Tanner. His breathing was still calm, but a flicker of his eyelids told Bram he was slowly coming back to them. Bram knew the second the realization hit Tanner that he was sandwiched between him and Ryder. He acted on instinct and released Ryder's hand, running it softly down Tanner's hair and shoulders. As if on cue, Ryder did the same thing, both of them adding whatever comfort they could to lessen Tanner's pain.

When those brilliant green eyes opened and locked on Bram's, he sucked in a breath at the need and emotion he saw there. Tentatively, Tanner lifted his hand and placed it on Bram's chest, the thin T-shirt barely any barrier at all from the warmth radiating through the material, as he buried his head in Bram's neck. He heard Ryder's breath hitch, which caused Tanner to freeze. Fearing he would see anger and disapproval in his lover's eyes, Bram's heart thudded in his chest as he lifted his gaze to Ryder's. In those beautiful golden eyes, he saw only love and understanding. They'd have to have a serious talk about this once they were alone, but for now, Ryder's emotions reflected Bram's. They might

not have been seeking a third for their relationship, but that third had found them just the same.

Breaking his eye contact with Ryder, Bram shifted down further on the bed so he could focus his attention on Tanner. With more pressure, he ran his hand down Tanner's shoulder and side, his fingers skating over the pale flesh. Goose bumps followed the trail of his hand as it made a circuit up and down Tanner's body. Bram bit back a moan when Tanner's hand curled inward against his chest, the gentle scrape of fingernails sending a jolt of need through his body.

Not wanting to push Tanner too much, too soon, he slowly moved his hand to Tanner's chest, mimicking Tanner's movement over his smooth chest. He wasn't stocky and defined like Ryder was with his scruff and dusting of hair down his chest and abs; instead Tanner was lean with very little body hair. All angles and bones with just enough muscle underneath to hint at the subtle strength he possessed. With a flick of his finger, Bram lightly scraped his fingernail over the taut bud of Tanner's nipple. Bram felt Tanner's hiss against his neck, the warm air making him shiver with need.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ryder's hand run over Tanner's back, the movement slow and steady and sensuous. Bram felt Tanner arch into that touch at the same moment he felt soft lips on his collarbone. The soft pressure was replaced with a gentle graze of teeth, causing Bram's cock to strain inside his shorts as it hardened. At the rate his heart was hammering in his chest, he knew that this was going to get out of hand quickly. Not that he didn't want it to; for the first time since he and Ryder became lovers, he yearned to feel the weight of another person in their bed. The feeling wasn't one of needing to replace Ryder, but more of the added heat and feel of someone else with them.

Bram pulled away from Tanner's lips until he could see the younger man's face. "We don't have to do anything you're not ready for. This... this isn't something we do. I mean, we've never taken a third before."

He paused and looked over Tanner's shoulder to Ryder, expecting to see some kind of recrimination in those piercing golden eyes. Instead he saw nothing but understanding and need. Bram wasn't alone in his feelings for Tanner, and together, always together, they would navigate this experience of desiring someone new.

Bram's eyes met Tanner's again, hoping to soften the expression in them before he spoke. "You'll always be welcome to stay here, with or without," he paused to wave a hand between all of them, "this."

Tanner's haunted green eyes still held the insecurity of someone who had loved and lost too much in life, but they also held a burning need that he couldn't, wouldn't, hide. "I don't want you to go." He shifted then and looked over his shoulder at Ryder behind him. "Either of you."

The heat that shot through Bram's body made him question the sanity of doing this, but when his gaze met Ryder's over Tanner's body, he knew with every fiber of his being they had already crossed that line and were now at the point of no return. Ryder was in this every bit as much as he was, the desire burning in his eyes confirming that.

Shutting off the part of his brain that tried to list all the reasons he shouldn't be doing this, Bram dug his fingers into Tanner's hip and simply let himself feel. The small moan that came from Tanner's lips brushed over his chest caused him to arch his hips forward, pulling Tanner closer to his body. Out of the corner of his eye, Bram saw Ryder lean forward, his lips gently grazing Tanner's shoulder blades. The act was so gentle, and yet so erotic, he felt his semi-erect cock lengthen inside his shorts. Together, he and Ryder moved their hands over Tanner's exposed skin. Each one sliding and caressing as the young man trembled between them.

When Tanner's hand slid lower down Bram's chest, Bram sucked in a breath as he felt long, thin fingers slip under the thin T-shirt. He hadn't been touched like this by anyone else but Ryder since they met eight years ago. To know that Ryder was here in this bed with him and Tanner and just as turned on as he was made the feeling that much more intense.

Shifting, Bram's hand left Tanner's body as he leaned back and pulled the shirt over his head. The material had barely hit the floor before Tanner's mouth moved over his chest. He closed his eyes as the gentle glide of lips across his feverishly warm skin moved to one of his nipples. Soon all Bram could focus on was the sharp graze of teeth over his taut bud, followed by a gentle lap of a tongue to smooth the pain away. Tanner's hands ran down the length of his abs as his mouth found Bram's other nipple, causing Bram to arch closer to that warm wet mouth.

He felt the bed dip but his eyes wouldn't open yet, the feel of Tanner's mouth on his body short-circuiting any of his brain cells from working at the moment. When he heard footsteps across the room, his eyes popped open in an instant. Over Tanner's shoulder, Bram could see Ryder walking down the hall. *Shit! I misread this entire thing and now I've gone and fucked it all up. Why in the hell had I even entertained the idea that this would work?*

Tanner stilled and looked at him with those hungry green eyes, aware that something had gone wrong. “Bram?” The absence of Ryder’s body behind him must have registered because his eyes became wide as saucers as he scooted away from him.

“Fuck! Bram... goddammit. I’m so fucking sorry.”

He turned and was trying to scramble off the bed when he stilled, his gaze focused on the door. Bram lifted his head to the doorway and sucked in a breath of relief. There, his shirt off and his shorts tenting what was obviously *not* an aversion to what they had just been doing, was Ryder. Bram searched his face for any kind of anger or sadness, but he only found the same burning desire in Ryder’s eyes that he had seen a moment ago in Tanner’s.

Before he could say anything, Ryder had crossed the room, set something on the bedside table and crawled back into bed. Tanner lifted his gaze to Ryder, his eyes still wide with worry, and asked in a trembling voice, “Ryder? Fuck... I’m so sorry—”

Bram’s heart expanded with love as he saw Ryder lower his head and kiss Tanner lightly on his neck. “Everything is fine. In fact, it’s perfect.”

Then Ryder’s eyes found Bram’s and a seductive smile spread across his face, causing Bram to suck in a breath. “Promise.”

Chapter 11

Tanner

Tanner watched both men as they looked at each other. Before he could protest again, he felt Bram's gentle caress on his skin as he ran his hand down Tanner's body. As Bram locked gazes with Ryder, Tanner allowed himself to be positioned on his side between them again, the warmth seeping into his suddenly chilled skin.

He shivered as Ryder's naked torso pressed up against his back, his hand gliding over Tanner's shoulders as Bram continued to stroke up and down his side. As if in tandem, both men moved closer to him, his body pressed between them. Their thin shorts did nothing to hide the fact they wanted him, and if his erection currently pressing against Bram's stomach was any indication, he wanted this just as badly as they did.

Smooth lips grazed his shoulder again and Tanner shivered when Ryder's scruff rubbed against his rapidly heating skin. With Bram's shirt now off, the two men pressed harder against Tanner's body, the soft hair on their chests making his skin break out in goose bumps. He knew he should probably stop this. He had never wanted to come between them. But as their hands ran over his exposed skin, all he could think was, *God, yes.*

It had been too long since he'd felt someone's hands on him like this. Too long since he'd given up his worries and fears to simply allow himself to feel wanted. To feel desired. To feel... needed. His thoughts were interrupted when Bram's hand glided from his side and swept across his abs. Tanner sucked in a breath as those strong fingers barely touched his skin, making him arch up against them so he could feel more of Bram's touch. As soon as he'd arched his back into Bram's touch, he gasped when he felt Ryder's fingertips smoothing over his spine. The sensation of the two of them, running their fingers and palms lower on his skin was enough to send his cock twitching against Bram.

As Ryder's hand rounded over his ass and the material of his boxers, Bram caught his eye and skimmed his fingers lightly at the band of his boxers. He leaned over to brush his lips over Tanner's temple and murmured, "This still okay? We can stop at any time."

Tanner thought he would lose his mind if they stopped now. Clearing his throat, he whispered, "I don't want to stop." He paused and looked over his shoulder at Ryder, his golden eyes half-lidded with desire. "Please don't stop."

All at once, hands made their way over Tanner's body. Gentle caresses that cupped his ass and skimmed over his rock hard cock. Lips that smoothed over his chest and back, with just the barest hint of stubble to make his body tremble harder than it already was. Together, both men tugged at his boxer shorts. Ryder shifted just enough to slide them down over Tanner's hips and legs, tugging his own shorts off and dropping the clothes on the floor. Tanner's body was still facing Bram, but when Ryder pressed up against him, he felt every defined inch of that warm body behind him.

"You're beautiful, Tanner," Ryder murmured against his shoulder. "Beautiful and strong and so incredibly sexy." Tanner began to shake his head. He wasn't strong and hadn't felt desirable in so long. But Bram's lips vibrated against his neck when he added, "You're all of those things and more. So much more."

Their words pierced his heart. How long had he wanted someone to desire and cherish him? How long had he waited for someone to feel this way about him? But the thought of losing them, both of them walking away and turning their back on him instantly crept into his mind. Bram must have felt him tense because he lifted his lips from Tanner's skin and softly touched his cheek with his fingertips. "No more running, Tanner. Just be here with us. Right here. Right now."

Again, his heart constricted as Bram's words washed over him. For the first time since his dad died, he let go and just allowed himself to get lost in the moment. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against Ryder's chest, reveling in the feel of Ryder's arm as it draped over him. With Ryder's warm breath on his neck, he felt fingers softly skim his nipples, circling and tweaking with each pass. When Ryder rolled the taut bud between his fingers, Tanner's breath hitched as he bucked back against Ryder's hard length. A subtle shift of the mattress in front of him caught his attention, his eyes barely opening in time to see Bram tug his own shorts off.

Tanner's mouth opened in pleasure and surprise when his gaze traveled down Bram's naked body and rested on his thick cock. Tentatively, Tanner reached out a hand and gently ran his finger over it. It jutted out from a dark nest of hair, a small pearl of precum glistening at the tip. When Bram sucked in a breath, Tanner flashed his eyes up to Bram's. His eyes were almost black with lust, but it was the need in them that helped bolster Tanner's confidence. With just the barest of pressure, he ran his fingers up and down Bram's length, his heart hammering in his chest when Bram arched forward into his touch.

Letting go of the last of his doubts, he wrapped his palm around Bram's length and began slow, gentle strokes. It had been so long since he'd been touched, but even longer since he'd been in a position to take his time and enjoy the person in bed with him. He had only ever had sex with one man at a time before, and the sensation of Ryder running his hands over his ass and thighs while he was touching Bram this way made him wonder why he had never tried this before.

He sighed with relief when he saw Bram's arm slip between their bodies, his hand warm against his stomach as his fingers curled around Tanner's cock. Bram hooked his free arm under Tanner's back and pulled him forward. As if it was the most natural thing in the world, Bram closed the distance between them and brushed his lips over Tanner's.

Tanner closed his eyes and just let himself enjoy the feeling of these two men as they ran their hands over him, pressing closer to him, their bodies gently rocking against his. The kiss was slow and sensuous with Bram tracing his lips with his tongue, stopping only to tug on Tanner's lower lip with his teeth before beginning that torturously sweet circuit over his lips again. The sensory overload was almost too much with Ryder's teeth grazing his shoulder and Bram's tongue demanding entrance into Tanner's mouth. He was lost on a wave of pleasure, and he wished to all the gods above that this wasn't going to stop any time soon.

The pace picked up as tender touches evolved into something harder, faster, more insistent. Bram's mouth moved down to his jaw while Ryder nipped and sucked on the join between his shoulder and neck. Tanner heard a soft snick then gasped when he felt Ryder's now slick cock rub along the cleft of his ass. Keeping one arm wrapped around Tanner's chest, his fingers rolling and tugging Tanner's nipple, Ryder passed a small bottle of lube to Bram over Tanner's shoulder. Tanner's breaths stuttered when Bram, keeping his gaze firmly locked on Tanner's, opened the bottle and poured some into his palm. He kept eye contact up until his mouth slanted over Tanner's, his slick hand wrapping around Tanner's cock.

Tanner writhed between them, his cry of pleasure swallowed by Bram who continued his assault on Tanner's mouth. The slip and slide of Ryder's length against his ass, the firm pumping of Bram's hand on his cock, sent Tanner higher and higher.

Before he could register what Bram was doing, the man facing him had shifted his body a little further down the bed and loosened his hand on Tanner's

body for only a second before Tanner's eyes flew open in ecstasy. The hand around his cock didn't fully wrap around his length anymore, but the delicious friction of Bram's body sliding along his almost had him coming right then and there.

Both men picked up the pace, sliding, grinding, pumping, and stroking in a synchronous rhythm that had to have come from years together. Bram stroked their cocks faster and Ryder picked up his pace, grinding against Tanner with total abandon. Tanner felt the long-forgotten jolt of electricity race down his spine, his fingers scraping over Bram's chest as his hands curled into fists. He slammed his eyes shut and threw his head back and cried out some unintelligible string of moans and words, his cock throbbing against Bram's as his cum coated not only Bram's hand, but his stomach as well.

He was gasping for breath when he felt the two men on either side of him tense and arch their backs, the bodies grinding harder against his. Together, they cried out, both of them striping his stomach and back with jets of warm semen.

Chapter 12

Ryder

Ryder lay back in the bed, his chest heaving as if he'd just run a 5K. A warm arm draped over him, pulling him onto his side and against the man next to him. He sighed against Tanner's neck, fully sated and happy.

They had spent the rainy weekend in each other's arms, stopping only to shower and eat. There was no awkwardness, no reservations, nothing but the sense that this was where they all belonged. After that first time in Tanner's bed, they had taken him by the hand and led him into their bedroom. Together, they showered and washed each other, their soft kisses replacing the conversation that they would have to have later. Clean and sated, they fell asleep in his and Bram's bed, a tangle of bodies that had no beginning and no ending.

Tanner was the first to wake, his body trembling from the cold, even though he was sandwiched between the two men. Ryder shifted and pulled him closer in his arms, the kisses they shared sweet and slow. Bram woke not too long after and crawled around to spoon him from behind. Something unspoken was shared over his shoulder when Bram and Tanner's eyes met, but Ryder didn't try to decipher what it meant once their hands were on him.

Bram wrapped his arms around Ryder's chest and rocked his cock against his ass while Tanner slid down the bed, kissing Ryder's now feverishly warm skin as he went lower and lower. There should have been so many reasons for what they were doing to be wrong, so many reasons to stop it. Instead, Ryder closed his eyes and let the two men in bed with him love and take care of him. Soft kisses and hands seemed to cover every inch of his body as Tanner took Ryder into his mouth at the same time he felt Bram's slick fingers slide past his tight ring of muscle. Together they caressed him, sucked him, fucked him with nothing but gentle moans of their pleasure disturbing the quiet of the room.

And that was how they spent the entire weekend. Sleeping, kissing, touching, loving, fucking, and food. It was as if they couldn't get enough of each other, even though their bodies had been sated many times over.

When Sunday evening rolled around, they cuddled together in bed and talked. Tanner shared more about his life in Callatown before he had finally been able to leave, while Ryder and Bram talked about their life together, how

they met, and what they had never thought they wanted. A third. Before Tanner had entered their lives, Ryder had never entertained the idea of having another person in their house, let alone another person in their bed and in their hearts. He and Bram were happy and content with each other. Why introduce someone else into that when it would most likely end in hurt feelings and jealousy? But after the past weekend, he couldn't imagine his and Bram's life without Tanner in it.

Bram's feelings echoed his own, his heart surging with love for the man who had stolen that heart so many years ago. It wouldn't always be easy, and most likely there would be growing pains that would have Ryder wanting to run the mountainside like Tanner had so many times before. But he wanted this, wanted both men, in his life and bed for as long as they would have him.

Relaxed and sated, he fell asleep, his hand intertwined with Bram's as their bodies cocooned Tanner's. When Ryder woke the next morning, he smiled and realized it was the first night they hadn't been woken up by Tanner's screaming. That thought carried him through his workday as he counted the hours until he was back home and in his lovers' arms again.

Chapter 13

Bram

The nightmares weren't gone completely, but they helped Tanner through them, together. And together they moved Tanner's things into their bedroom, falling asleep in a tangle of limbs and bodies every night.

As the weeks passed, Tanner came out of his shell more and more. His normally pale skin began to show the healthy glow of being outside in the sun. There were times Tanner took steps back, usually after hearing about another bombing or mass killing in Callatown. Bram's heart still ached when the past and present of what happened in Callatown caught up to Tanner and he left the house to run. He didn't stay away long and usually came back more at peace, but Bram knew it would be a long time before that part of Tanner's life didn't haunt him anymore.

With a tiny bit of begging and pleading on his part and some encouraging smiles from Ryder, Tanner finally relented and signed up for summer classes at the university. Bram beamed with pride at what a natural Tanner was, and helped him with his studies whenever he could. Ryder was the one who stayed up late and corrected his essays or philosophy assignments, and Bram helped him through his Bio I class. There were moments of frustration from Tanner over how unprepared he felt for college and many sleepless nights that had nothing to do with the bedroom, but together they navigated the waters that were so foreign to all of them.

On the last day of the summer term, Bram stood on the porch to their cabin and looked out at the mountains. It was the first day he and Ryder had off together in almost a month, but the house seemed too quiet with Tanner gone. His thoughts were interrupted and he smiled when he felt familiar arms circle his waist. The turn of his head was rewarded with a soft kiss and a gentle smile.

They stayed like that for a few minutes listening to the steady sound of their heartbeats and the gentle breeze blowing the leaves across the ground.

“Are you happy?”

Bram stilled for a moment, turning the question over in his mind before answering. With a gentle tug on Ryder's arm, he pulled his lover around to face him and cradled his face in his hands. “I am. Are you?”

He watched as Ryder smiled and nodded, his heart clenching from that answer alone. "I am. I never thought... I mean, I figured it would just be the two of us. Once I met you, I knew you were the only one for me. But now..."

"Now there's Tanner."

Bram sighed and pulled Ryder into his arms. "You know I love you, right?" He felt rather than saw Ryder's head nod against him as he buried his face into Bram's neck.

"And you know I will always love you."

Again, a small nod brushed against his skin, but he pulled back so he could see Ryder's eyes. "So the question is, do we have enough love for the three of us?"

Ryder's eyes held so many emotions in them, but the one that settled and stayed there was love. He leaned forward and brushed his lips over Bram's as he whispered, "Yes."

Bram's heart shifted inside his chest, rearranging itself with that one simple word from Ryder's lips. With their arms wrapped around each other, they stood in silence, both fully aware that one word had sealed their future.

Epilogue

Lady Estrella heard the fray before she was fully able to see it. What met her eyes when she rounded the corner stopped her in her tracks, a smile sliding across her face.

A large felis with a brown and black tortoise shell coat was running at full speed across the snow-covered stretch of land that ran behind Ryder and Bram's house. Suddenly a blur of movement caught her eye as a slightly smaller, sleek shifter raced past the larger felis, surpassing him in mere seconds before he reached the tree line. The sleek tan and black cat held its head up high and preened as it watched the other shifter approach it, shocking that smug look off its face when the larger cat tackled it to the ground.

Her laughter escaped her lips before she could catch herself, earning her the attention of the beautiful man standing a few yards in front of her. Ryder's smile was radiant as he turned and walked over to her. Her status prevented her from showing favoritism amongst her clan, but the man standing next to her and his long-time partner were very close to filling that position in her heart.

"Do they do this often?"

Ryder chuckled and looked back out at the two cats as they took turns pouncing and pinning each other. "Would you like the truth or would it be better for me to salvage a little bit of Bram's dignity right here and now?"

Lady Estrella laid a hand on his arm and squeezed gently. "I'd like the truth, but not about that. I'll leave it to my imagination. But I do want to know if you're happy? If Tanner and Bram are happy?"

His answering smile said it all, but it still made her heart sing when he nodded. "We are. I never thought I could love someone as much as I love Bram." He paused and looked straight into her eyes before continuing. "It's not the same, though. They're both so different. But I love them both. Very much."

When the two shifters realized Ryder's was not the only gaze on them, they shifted back into their human forms and made their way over to the house.

"Lady Estrella."

"Bram. You look well. The exercise regimen you have going on looks good on you."

With a mixture of embarrassment and good humor, Bram chuckled. "I try, my regent."

"Hello Tanner. I've heard wonderful things from your professors at the university."

She watched as Tanner's pale skin bloomed with color, but his green eyes held hers as a shy smile spread across his face. "Thank you, Lady Estrella. I'm trying hard to keep up with it all."

She smiled at the duality of that statement. So much had happened in his life over the course of the past year. He looked better than she had ever seen him, but she had to be sure.

"The construction is almost finished on the new housing facility. I thought you three would like to know. Just in case..." She purposely let the end of that sentence fade, wanting them to make the decision on their own. It was obvious they were in love, but sometimes that wasn't enough and one needed an out.

Silence hung in the air between them, until a soft but sure voice broke it. "That's wonderful, my regent, but I've found my home."

Both men moved until they were on either side of Tanner, their arms winding their way around his body and towards each other. She smiled as she watched them and nodded her head.

"Yes. Yes you have."

The End

Author Bio

Eileen Griffin lives in Texas, but loves to travel and has spent many summers crossing Europe with nothing but a backpack on her back. She enjoys TexMex, lives for good wine, and has a certain penchant for purple unicorns. She loves reading all genres of books, but her current obsession is writing M/M romance. Her past published works include: Chasing Matt, a M/M novella co-authored with Nikka Michaels, Dinner For Two, a M/F romance novella, and "Claiming Ayden", a M/M shifter romance that is part of Evenight's Alpha's Claim Anthology: M/M Edition.

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