



Mating Balance

Gina A. Rogers

Kyle Adams

Table of Contents

Love’s Landscapes.....	3
Mating Balance – Information.....	5
Acknowledgements.....	6
Mating Balance.....	7
Chapter One.....	8
Chapter Two.....	18
Chapter Three.....	27
Chapter Four.....	38
Chapter Five.....	48
Chapter Six.....	57
Author Bio.....	68

Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

STORY TITLE

By Author Name

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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MATING BALANCE

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Photo Description

A man standing alone and naked in the woods next to a tree looking into the distance. He has messy, finger-length, brown hair. His sleek, well-defined muscular body, looks quick and flexible. Tan skin, pouty lips, high cheekbones, and a straight nose. Broad bulky shoulders and a defined V leading down to close cropped crotch and thick thighs.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I am a shifter looking for my mate and need to satisfy the overwhelming animal urge that dwells within me.

After many years prowling the globe looking for him, I believe my search is over.

I can smell him near me, I can feel him near me but, I want to feel him inside me!

Sincerely,

S.M.

P.S. Please, No BDSM. I'd prefer his mate NOT to be a twink or of that variety. I'm thinking same size guy or bigger.

You choose the animal.

Extra points to you if you go the full hog and leave nothing out.

Story Info

Genre: paranormal

Tags: shifter, men with pets, steamy, playful, funny, dark, mates, armpit, sex outside, explicit

Content Warnings: It's dark until the sun comes up.

Word Count: A satisfying 26,799 words!

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to S.M. Franklin for posting such an inspiring prompt and photo. We hope you like this story.

Also we'd like to thank the awesome volunteers from MM Group for coordinating and hosting this wonderful event.

Cover by the talented and amazing Enny Kraft

MATING BALANCE

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Chapter One

“Ten more minutes,” Troy whispered to himself. He was on the edge of mania, his voice strained and jagged. His mouth was so dry. The recycled air pumping through the cabin of the airplane burned the raw tunnel of his throat as he slowly inhaled and exhaled. His beast was riding him hard. Stomach clenched and coiled tight. His insides twisted to a nearly unbearable level of tension and pain. There, just beneath his skin, was pure relief. He could shift, let the monster deep within out. It would be so easy. So *easy*. Battling his nature, fighting against an inevitable outcome? That was hard. And it was utterly fucking useless. Hope was a fickle bitch.

Fuck hope and fuck this. *Shift. Let go. Do it. Shift. Do it.* Troy shook his head, foolishly thinking he could dislodge those thoughts. He fought so hard for control, a fight that grew more difficult with every second that ticked by. *Shift. Give in. Feels so right. Shift. Do it.* Troy was losing the battle. He should have known he wouldn't be able to hang on to himself. Even back when his human side had ruled, flying always put his beast on edge. It was unnatural. Humans were unnatural. *Shift!*

Troy's claws shot out, gouging into the armrest he'd been gripping. Sweet relief! He wanted to tear and shred. A deep growl grew in the pit of his stomach. He stretched and twisted his neck, still fighting the change. The smell of sweat and fear nearly drove him insane, the scents like drugs to the predator within. Except something was wrong. It was the sharp tang of his own fear, the salty smell of his own sweat he scented. He was one of the largest cats in the world! *He didn't fear. He was fear.*

His beast was confused, and that tiny opening was all Troy needed to rein himself in, looking around to see if any of the other passengers had noticed. Thankfully, not many people had chosen to travel at four o'clock in the morning on a Tuesday. Troy released the breath he'd been holding, as well as his death grip on the seat.

Ten more minutes. Minutes were a human concept, and they allowed him to quantify, set parameters. Human. He was a human too, damn it. He wanted human things: a home, a partner, coffee. He wanted to fight for these things, but was overwhelmed by his failure and feelings of impending doom.

At twenty-nine, he was running out of time. He was the last living member of his family and, if history repeated itself, he would not make it to his thirtieth

birthday. It was the reason he'd spent the last five years roaming the world, desperately searching for his mate, convinced it was the only way to free himself from his family's curse. He could still hear his grandfather's voice on the day he died, a deep and warm baritone, telling him, "Save yourself, Troy. Find your mate. Don't let her win. You must save yourself."

Of course, little did his granddaddy know that his mate would not be female. Troy never told him he was gay. Not that he thought for a second that his pap was a bigot, he just didn't want to burden him any further. His grandfather was the only adult member of Troy's family left. As a human, he didn't fall victim to the horrible spell that tore Troy's family apart. His father, a grown shifter, had immediately succumbed to his animal and gone feral. Troy and his brothers were temporarily spared, until they reached their full maturity around age thirty.

Despite having lost his own wife in an auto accident, and then losing his daughter and son-in-law just two years later, his grandfather remained strong and did all he could to raise his grandsons. It nearly destroyed the man when Troy's two older brothers fell to the curse. A year later and the heartache had become too much for him. He gave up, and died of natural causes. Troy was the last remaining shifter in their line, so he had let his granddad believe what was easiest, allowed him that little bit of peace. But the truth was that finding a male mate would be even more unlikely than finding one at all.

Troy's stomach lurched, letting him know that they were descending. Seven more minutes and he would finally be off this suffocating tin can from hell. "Ten minutes after that and I'll be out of the airport," Troy mumbled. The trip had been a special kind of hell, but it was nothing compared to the exhaustion and utter defeat of the last five years.

He'd run through mountains and jungles, combed beaches and traipsed across deserts. And that was only the places he went in his animal form. For the last year, Troy avoided shifting as much as possible. Each shift, every second he allowed his beast control, brought him closer to the edge. Not wanting to risk going completely feral so far from home, he remained human and continued to comb the world's busiest cities and every small town and village he could reach.

And still he was returning home empty-handed. The weight of that realization hit him in the gut like a twelve-pound bowling ball traveling a hundred miles an hour. His skin prickled and his eyes constricted. Troy bent over, clutching at his head as his beast screamed to get free. He never came

closer to tearing a human to shreds than he did at the moment when a flight attendant shook his shoulder. "Sir, we've landed. Do you need assistance de-boarding?"

Troy leapt from his seat, ripped his duffel bag from the overhead compartment and bolted off the plane. He didn't have any luggage to claim. He hadn't bothered, wouldn't need any of his things much longer anyways. The only reason he even brought a carry-on was to keep from seeming suspicious, which he certainly wasn't thinking about as he practically ran through the terminal. With the time zone change and travel time, it was just after lunchtime at the Seattle/Tacoma airport, and it was busy enough that Troy, thankfully, didn't attract much attention.

Bursting through the doors to the outside, he frantically looked around for the car he hired to drive him the two-hour distance to his home in the mountains northwest of Leavenworth in Washington State. Locating the driver holding the sign for Fadale, Troy walked towards him on trembling legs. So exhausted. So tired of fighting. He settled back against the leather seat of the car and waited to reach his final destination. His body had never ached so bad in his entire life, a deep, weary kind of ache. No, maybe that was how his soul felt. His body was energized and drawn tight, ready to spring. Troy swore he could feel the pressure to shift in every single cell.

Not much longer. Hang on. Just hang on. Eyes closed, Troy lulled himself into a place of peace, aided by the white noise of the car's revved engine. His mind wandered along the roads and sidewalks of the last five years. He'd seen some amazing and beautiful things and met people who had profoundly impacted his life.

Across the back of his eyelids, he could see the things he loved: The contrast of elegantly scrolled wrought iron and brick next to bright neon signs advertising jazz and blues on Bourbon Street in New Orleans. The purplish-pink of the skyline as he'd watched the sunset from atop the London Eye. The wrinkled and hunched old man who refused Troy's offer of a ride along a hilly dirt road in Scotland and, instead, invited Troy to park his rental and walk with him.

A knife speared Troy's chest. At least, that's what it felt like. He arched his back and let out a pained hiss. Warm tears trailed down his face. "Nothing!" Troy's voice sounded like it'd been dragged across gravel. When the driver raised a questioning eyebrow at him in the rear view mirror, Troy tried to cover his outburst with a cough. Satisfied that he wasn't having some kind of fit, the

driver turned his focus back to the road. Troy looked away, watching the scenery fly by in a blur, and whispered to no one in particular, "Nothing. I've got nothing left." He had no mate to share these experiences with, no future in which he would tell these stories to his family. His mind raced and his pulse quickened.

These episodes were coming more and more frequently. Troy's thoughts were like shattered glass: broken, displaced, sharp and dangerous. There were brief moments of clarity, and he had taught himself to use them well. Put the window down. Shatter. Cold air on his face. Shatter. Claws piercing his thigh.

It was the first time he'd used such extreme measures, but the burst of pain worked as he'd intended, breaking through the chaos of his thoughts and bringing the whirlwind of glass shards to a halt. He'd drawn his own blood. The sight held his attention, mesmerized him. The bright red of his blood, his life force, spread across the material of his jeans.

It was a macabre image, and yet, it was beautiful. The key to the prison that was now his life lay hidden in the small red droplets. He would have to spill more of his own blood, but he'd made the choice that was best for him, and he would follow through with it before it was too late to free himself. He loved his animal side dearly, but he loved his humanity too, and the idea of being a slave to one without the other was simply unbearable.

It was only a matter of hours now. The car approached the long, winding driveway that led to his family home, a large A-frame log cabin that sat in the middle of nearly one-hundred acres of forest in the Wenatchee Mountains. Twenty minutes later, he paid the driver and dragged his weary body inside.

Home. It was amazing how the last five years hadn't impacted that at all. This simple structure, one of billions across the planet, had always been, and would always be, home. Troy breathed in deep, pulling in the familiar scents of pine, old quilts and the slightly sour smell of the natural cleaner his mother had always used. He could also smell the lingering scent of the young shifter from his pride that he paid to make the hour drive once a week to check on the place.

The pride was spread out all across northwestern Washington due to their solitary and territorial nature, but Troy had refused to hire some local human company. Pack was honorable, dependable and loyal. He wanted everything to remain perfect for the moment when he first walked his mate through the door.

Troy fell to his knees and let out a scream that was part animal, part human and all anguish. Throat raw, he slumped to the floor. Even his beast was too

wearily to fight him. The silence that now surrounded him was twofold, both calming and agitating. How could it have been only five years since he'd last heard his grandfather's voice? Six years since he'd last joked with both of his brothers, and nearly twenty since the boisterous laughter of his parents filled these rooms.

Troy crawled the thirty or so feet across the hardwood floor to the plaid couch that sat facing a large stone fireplace. He lay on his back on the worn cushions, one hand thrown above his head and one resting on his heart, and stared at the ceiling. No! He jerked himself upright. He would not—could not delay. Even now he could feel his awareness splintering, spreading like cracks across thin ice. Soon there would be nothing left to stand on and he would fall into the murky water and drown.

Well, the fuck he would allow it to happen to him. He was going to take control and jump, sink to the bottom with his free will intact. Hands on his knees, Troy pushed himself to standing and turned towards the small home office next to the kitchen where he stored all his important papers. Passing the end table, he reached to right the photo frame he vaguely remembered knocking over in his haste to sit up.

Troy couldn't help but smile, despite the situation, at the photo. It was taken on one of their many family treks into the mountains. As the protector, Troy's dad almost always went in his shifted form while his mom played mediator, navigator and photographer. On this particular day Troy and his brothers, Travis and Tristan, were pretending to be mighty hunters.

They stalked their father for miles before finally slaying him with their mighty twig swords. Their father had been a good man, putting aside his ego and allowing them to pose for a picture standing above his "lifeless" body. Of course, they hadn't expected him to jump to life right at the moment the shutter clicked, capturing their hilariously startled and terrified little faces.

With a heavy sigh, Troy gently placed the photo back in its rightful place. Driven by melancholy and a need to relive the bittersweet past, Troy continued around the room, pausing at each picture frame and relishing the sharp slice of pain that came at reliving all those precious memories. Above the mantel hung the last photo taken of the entire family together.

Troy had wanted to destroy it, but his grandfather refused to allow him to. "Cecilia loved your mother and all of you very much," he told Troy. "You can see that love in the picture she took. People do regrettable things out of anger

and grief. Don't repeat her mistake and destroy something beautiful for the same reasons."

Troy listened to his pap at the time, but he had never been able to really forgive Cecilia and still felt the urge to rip the photo to shreds. He had once considered Cecilia, their closest neighbor, an aunt. She always had the time and energy to play with them and loved the mountains as much as they did. It wasn't until after the fact that Troy learned the truth.

Cecilia's great-grandfather was a Leshy, a type of woodland sprite, and some of his magic and love of nature and mischief had been passed down to her. It was the reason she'd moved into the isolated forest, and also the reason she and Troy's mother had become best friends. His family's shifter nature called to Cecilia. She had such a way with animals as well as plants or anything that drew its energy and life force from the earth. But she was a Leshy, if only in part, and those bastards could never resist causing trouble.

Cecilia often lured his mother into the woods to play games. They climbed the highest trees, crossed the widest ravines and just simply played like children. Troy could remember his mom coming home smiling and flush from her time with Cecilia. Until the day she simply didn't come home at all.

The spirited Leshy was always challenging and daring Troy's mother. He knew now that it was a part of their nature to cause mischief and trouble. That particular day, Cecilia bit off more than she could chew. She begged and cajoled her best friend into exploring one of the many large caves throughout the mountain. When they came upon a mother bear and her two cubs, Cecilia arrogantly thought her magic would save them.

She told Troy's father that she tried to connect with the bear and calm her, but in the end, her magic wasn't strong enough to counteract the bear's instinct to protect her young. When the bear attacked, his mother shifted to defend Cecilia, and it cost her her life. Reality isn't anything like fiction. Shifters are not immortal, nor do they live longer or heal faster. They are simply humans who share their spirit with an animal and can take that animal's form when the spirit called them.

"Dad," Troy spoke aloud in the empty room, simply wanting to be able to call for his father one more time. Looking at the photo above the mantel, it was hard to reconcile the image of his father smiling so bright it lit his eyes up with the way he looked only a week later. Troy's memory of the moment his dad discovered the death of his mate sent a chill down his spine. The man Troy

knew disappeared instantly, replaced by a raging, anger-fueled beast. He went utterly berserk, raging through the house and destroying everything before fleeing into the woods.

Cecelia had tried to go after him, tried to apologize, which had been a mistake. Mind clouded by grief so intense, the kind only the severing of a mating could cause, his father turned his fury outward. Knowing how connected Cecelia was to the woods and nature surrounding their homes, and knowing that destroying any part of that would hurt her dearly, he set out to cause her the maximum amount of pain he could.

It was a well-known fact amongst them that Cecelia shared a bond with all things of the earth, but she had a particularly strong love for an old, majestic sycamore tree that stood over one-hundred and fifty feet tall at the top of the mountain. The ear-piercing scream Cecelia let loose when she felt the first chop of the axe still haunted Troy to this day. By the time his father set the tree on fire, Cecelia had been reduced to a listless pile of flesh and bone, her connection to the tree causing a visceral reaction.

But that wasn't the worst of it. The fire set by Troy's father quickly burned out of control. The man had not been in his right mind, or else he never would have risked the catastrophe. Ten acres of Cecelia's land burnt to the ground before the flames had been halted. And still that wasn't the worst part. A gray wolf family, the same mother and cubs that Cecelia thought of as her children, had been trapped by the fire and perished.

Thinking back to those pivotal moments in his life as an adult whose current emotional state was raw, Troy gained a new perspective. Still staring at the photo Cecelia took, Troy spoke words he never thought to say. "I'm sorry, Cecelia. You lost a lot that day, too." As soon as he uttered his apology though, his mind turned to what happened next, and once again his anger surfaced, and his thoughts began to shatter.

Troy's fist snapped out and connected with the rough stone of the wall. Fucking Leshy bitch destroyed everything he held dear. Yes, her precious tree and wolves had been destroyed too, but only after she killed his mother. And what she'd done next had changed Troy's life forever. It was absolutely unforgivable. He would never forgive her! Troy swept his arm across the mantle, knocking everything to the ground before letting out a roar that could be heard for miles around.

Snippets of that horrible day began to flit through his brain. Cecelia standing in the middle of their yard, hair wild and clothes dirty and unkempt.

The empty eyes of his father as he marched down the porch steps towards her. "You are not welcome in my home, you murdering bitch," Troy's father had roared.

Troy's pulse rocketed and his skin prickled. The slideshow in his mind sped up and, with each image, his muscles tightened. "I loved her, too," Cecelia yelled back at him. Leaves and twigs swirled around her like a mini tornado. Troy remembered feeling the charge in the air, remembered a sense of energy being pulled towards the center of the vortex where the insane Leshy stood. He'd been scared. His beast hated that feeling, even if it was merely a memory, and doubled its efforts to be released.

Troy fought with all he had. He'd learned in the past year that if he allowed his animal spirit to force a shift, he had less control over coming back. He planned to take one final run in his animal form, but it would be on his terms. He had so little control over his life at this point that he hung on to what he could in a white-knuckled, iron grip.

Needing to establish order, Troy went to the kitchen and retrieved supplies to clean up the mess he'd made. He set the heavy wooden sculptures his grandfather had carved back on either end of the stone mantel. Several photo frames still lay on the floor, surrounded by shattered glass. He swept the shards into a pile and carefully picked up the frames. He cut his finger on a slender piece of glass when he removed it from one of the frames.

Blood welled and, once again, the sight caught and held his attention. So much was hidden in that red drop of fluid: his eye color, his height, his history. His curse. Never before that fateful day would he have thought something as permanent and primal as his DNA could be altered. Until that day, when his father and Cecelia's words grew more and more heated and spiked with hatred.

"It was just a stupid fucking tree!" The words his dad spoke acted like a knife, wounding Cecelia's fragile state and slicing her open, allowing all her anguish to gush out.

"I curse you, Roger Fadale." The Leshy's words were hushed but held the weight of a thousand choirs. "Without your mate you are nothing but a beast, and so a beast you shall become, but always will your human side be aware." Cecelia's voice grew louder, ominous. "Always will you know what you have lost. Until the day you perish and the earth you mock reclaims her due."

And with her last word, the whirlwind exploded outward. Troy swore he felt the charged air actually pass through him. He still thought that might have been

a possibility, especially knowing that every cell in his body, as well as those of his father, grandfather, and brothers, had been affected that day by the curse. Now when he looked at his blood, all he could see was a cage.

His father was affected almost immediately. Troy's grandfather believed the curse worked so quickly on him because his father's mate was dead, and with his mating bond severed, he had no way to fight the curse. Up until his death, the man swore the key to it all was for Troy to find, and bond with, his mate. Five years of effort and countless hours of searching had proven to be fruitless, and Troy was out of time.

Resigned, Troy licked the blood from his finger and finished cleaning up the mess. He would leave everything in order for his pride. The house and all the money he inherited from his parents' life insurance policies for their "accidental" deaths would be left to the pride, with the caveat that they continue his work in learning about Leshies and ridding the world of their dangerous and deadly magic.

Troy had made a point of learning everything he could about their kind shortly after his parents' deaths. He knew how to find them, knew the mark they all carried and knew in most cases they were just as fragile as humans, having very little of the pure magic left after generations of mixing with people and, occasionally, even shifters.

But by the time he was both old enough and strong enough to search for more of Cecelia's kin, his brothers had begun to show signs of going feral and all his efforts were focused on finding a cure. Each death Troy suffered through, every single time he had to hold one of his brothers down to keep them from hurting themselves, the hundreds of times he looked into his brothers' eyes and saw fear and desperation, had been like the swipe of a whetstone against a sword. His hatred for the Leshy was sharper than any blade on the planet.

Not wanting to get his animal worked up again, Troy set about finalizing his plans. He pulled all his paperwork from the safe and laid it out on the kitchen counter. He booted up his old laptop and used it to write an email to the leader of his pride, scheduling it to be sent the next day. His final act was to strip out of his clothes, methodically folding them and placing them on his bed, before walking out the back door.

He wanted one last run. One last time of sharing the thrill of a chase, the smells of the earth and the glory of being free with his animal spirit. Despite the

situation, he loved his beast. It was as much a part of him as the human. He would never give up either side of himself. And that was the crux of the matter. Taking a deep, cleansing breath, Troy shifted.

He loped and he stalked and he ran. And ran. Glorifying in the stretch of his muscles, the familiar mountain air against his fur and the feel of his claws digging into the soft earth. He took everything in as he circled his family's vast property. When he came to the top of the mountain where his entire family was buried, he lay on the slight mound of his mother's grave and let out a scream only his kind could make.

When the sun began to set, Troy lumbered to his feet and slowly headed east, towards the small stream that divided his property from the now abandoned land that once belonged to Cecelia. He wanted to taste the pure, untouched water one last time before he made his way south to the fifty-foot cliff that overlooked the solid, jagged outcrop of stones at the bottom of a large ravine.

Maybe it was Troy's imagination, but he swore the air grew stagnant and foreboding as he approached the stream. Crouching down, he lapped at the cool water. It was the last thing he would do before running full-on towards the cliff and over the ledge. He rose on all fours, closed his eyes and raised his chin high. This was it. He drew in a deep breath and held it.

His eyes flew open and the air whooshed out of his lungs. He breathed in again. And again. There, on the air, the smell of pine and morning dew. It rolled across his tongue. It was the sweetest, most wonderful taste in the world. He took off running, following his nose and his instincts as they led him closer and closer to his mate.

Chapter Two

Seth Marster inserted his key into the lock as stealthily as possible. Slowly and quietly, he turned the doorknob and pushed the door open. It was barely open an inch before he could hear the thudding patter of little feet barreling his way. He slipped inside just as Kashmir and Silver, his two ferrets, came rushing out to greet him. Trying to sneak into the house was a little game they liked to play, but it didn't matter how silent he tried to be, they always knew when he got home.

This time he even parked about a half mile down the stone driveway from his house so they wouldn't hear his truck. It obviously didn't make a difference, but he still enjoyed trying to catch them by surprise, and he simply loved having a chance to casually stroll the rest of the way home surrounded by the beautiful mountains.

Kashmir and Silver each scurried up one of his pant legs until they reached his shoulders. They bumped their heads under his ears and along his jaw. "I missed you guys, too," he cooed, rubbing each of them under their chins. When Seth first moved out of his parents' house and into this secluded place in the mountains of Washington, he knew he wanted a pet to keep him company. Of course, he'd been thinking about a dog or maybe a parrot he could teach to talk. When he walked into the store in Seattle though, something about the ferrets called to him. They were energetic and mischievous, and that was right on par with his own personality, so he'd taken them both.

It was a decision he would never regret, even as he noticed his spare house key was once again missing from the table by the door. Oh well, he couldn't blame his girls for trying to entertain themselves while he was gone. He always felt bad keeping them cooped up inside his cottage whenever he had to go into town or be out where they couldn't go. Better to pen them inside though. He couldn't risk losing them by letting them run around in the yard on their own all day. Even with him there, a hawk would occasionally swoop down and attempt to snatch one of his babies. At least they were litter trained, which meant he didn't have to put them in a cage when he left.

Although, caging them would spare him having to hunt around for the damn key, not that he didn't have a pretty good idea of where it might be. Kashmir and Silver were little thieves. They loved to take anything they could carry off in their tiny jaws, especially if it was all shiny. Thankfully, they were very

predictable thieves. They always stored the items either under his bed or beneath the sofa in the living room. Seth chuckled out loud. He usually forgot where he put things anyway, so it often turned out to be helpful knowing where to look for his stuff.

Seth walked further into his home, both ferrets still sitting on his shoulders, seeking attention. Kashmir was making dooking noises in his left ear. She'd always been more vocal than her sister, Silver, who was content sitting on his right shoulder, licking and bumping against his finger.

"I'm going to shower and get out of my work clothes, and then we can go play outside!" he told them. Talking to them like they could understand him was habit. And, honestly, he wasn't totally convinced that they couldn't. Sure, they never talked back, but he'd always felt like he could communicate with them, and animals in general, on a deeper level. "I'm probably just a crazy tree-hugging kook-a-doodle, like the rest of my family," he mused.

Seth came from a long line of environmental activists, horticulturalists and veterinarians. His father was a landscape architect who specialized in natural landscaping and his mother, a pet shrink, or animal psychologist, as she preferred to be called. He blamed them for being ostracized as a young child until he was old enough to figure out he probably shouldn't tell people he could talk to animals or that plants had feelings, too.

Mom and Dad always humored him though, and never made him feel crazy. Seth guessed that was what parents did, and he loved them very much for it. Moving out had been a difficult decision, but Seth had gotten antsy over the last few years, feeling like he was missing something. When he got the chance to buy this house, he knew it was the right decision, both personally and professionally.

Seth's parents had obviously been disappointed when he decided to follow the path to becoming a successful artist rather than continue in the family business of working with nature. It helped that the focus of his work was the earth and all its beauty. He painted wildlife scenes, abstracts of anything that caught his eye, and anything he found beautiful and inspiring. When he'd first brought up the idea to his mom, she'd tried to talk him into something else, but eventually accepted it was what he was meant to do and got behind him one hundred percent.

His parents were always understanding and patient. Seth kind of thought it came with being a hippie type. He remembered some of his childhood antics

and the sheer amount of patience his mom and dad had as he rummaged through the fridge for a drink. Like when he was eight and their dog, Buster, promised he only wanted out front to pee and would absolutely not chase the mailman. Well, Buster did chase the mailman, who panicked and started running around screaming for help. Seth's dad had to pick up the mail at the post office for two months afterward.

Then there was the raccoon that was tired of living in the trees, or so Seth's seven-year-old self thought the animal had been trying to tell him. He'd also thought letting the raccoon move into the spare room was a good idea. His parents woke up in the middle of the night when they heard a crashing sound coming from the kitchen. Thinking someone had broken in, they called the police, who ended up capturing the animal and turning it over to animal control.

Seth had gotten in trouble for that one. Not for "talking" to the raccoon, but because they had been so upset at the animal's inhumane capture by the cops. Of course, that was nothing compared to the trouble he got into after the skunk incident. He had to give up his allowance for a year to go towards buying all new furniture for the living room. Then there was the incident with a lizard, which ended up living in their walls for two weeks. The stories just went on. Seth placed his empty glass into the sink and smiled to himself. He had been a handful and was lucky he had such great parents. A sibling would have been nice, but thinking back on all his antics, he was pretty sure he understood why he was an only child.

Walking into the living room, Seth scooped his ferrets up by their bellies and set them on the back of his couch. Kashmir hissed in displeasure at being set down. "Hey, stop that! Give me twenty minutes and we'll go play." He was pretty sure Kashmir understood him when she narrowed her eyes, looking annoyed as she hissed again. Simply because he thought animals could understand him, and he them, didn't mean they listened. He rubbed both of them behind their cute little ears and said he'd be right back before heading to the shower.

He grabbed a clean towel out of the linen closet between his room and the tiny bathroom. And he meant *tiny*. It was the smallest bathroom he'd ever seen, smaller than the bathroom in his parents' RV or the one he used on the airplane on his way to see the Brazilian rainforest for the first time. At least it was up-to-date and cheery, even if he only had room for a toilet, a pedestal sink and a small shower stall.

Moving into the cottage in the woods three years ago was the perfect solution to his wanderlust, and the surrounding area provided plenty of inspiration for his art. It had needed a lot of work before it felt like home. No one lived there for many years and everything was out of code. The structure itself had been well-built and was still solid. He gutted the inside and had to replace all the windows, many of which had broken, letting in all types of weather and animals. He hired someone local to update the plumbing and electrical, but installed the natural bamboo flooring in the kitchen, bathroom and main part of the house himself. In his bedroom, he splurged and bought wool carpeting because he liked how it felt on his bare feet.

Seth stripped out of his hiking clothes, tossing his organic cotton T-shirt carelessly on the bed and letting his cargo shorts lay wherever they landed after he kicked them off. He knew that before the water even warmed up, Silver and Kashmir would drag everything into a pile under the bed so they could burrow into it. It was part of the reason he always went commando. The idea of his babies putting his underwear in their mouths and then sleeping on it? No.

Seth carefully stepped under the warm spray of water, contorting his body just right to avoid banging his elbow against the wall or ramming his knee into the glass door. It had taken him several weeks to learn the trick to getting clean without injuring himself. He wasn't a small guy. In fact, many of the men he dated remarked on how tall and broad he was. That was the second thing that drew people to him; the first was always his creamy skin and fiery red hair.

Speaking of hair, he ducked his head under the spray to wash away any dirt and grime. The original showerhead only came up to his chest, but he'd been able to have that raised when they redid the plumbing. His next project would be extending the bathroom. He secretly hoped someday he would be able to use the ol' conserving water bit to talk his boyfriend into sharing the space. Remodeling would mean he'd lose some space in his bedroom, but it would be worth it.

After his shower, he put on a pair of comfortable drawstring shorts and slipped on a snug green tank top. He liked feeling the sun on his skin. Soaking in the rays made him feel like his battery was being recharged. His cottage was secluded enough he could get away with just wearing nothing, except he didn't relish the idea of his fair skin burning in all the most uncomfortable places.

He also worried about someone from town stopping by unannounced. Then the whole town would start calling him "The Nudist Hermit" instead of just

“The Hermit”. Seth guessed he had earned that nickname. Everyone in town was nice enough, but he still preferred animals over people most of the time.

Too bad that didn't help him get any closer to finding his hypothetical shower-sharing boyfriend. Finding that person he could be himself around, someone who understood his bone-deep need to be surrounded by nature, seemed more and more impossible in today's high tech, urban world. His previous relationships had never lasted long, usually ending right around the time the weather turned cold and nasty, and hiking was no longer the postcard perfect novelty it started out as for most of his boyfriends.

The last guy he dated, like many of the ones before him, was into having fun and not taking anything too seriously. He had walked out on Seth after they spent a night trapped on the mountaintop by a surprise snowstorm. Seth had enjoyed the cold, crisp air and taking photos of all the clean, white snow contrasted against the darker landscape, but Joel had hated every second of it and refused to ever go again, stating, “My ass does not look good covered in goose bumps.”

Seth laughed for an hour at how ridiculous that statement was. It was another problem he often ran into. He was a happy guy, loved having fun and tried not to take anything too seriously, but when he dated other happy, fun types, he found they were incompatible. Many lonely nights he spent sitting in one of his Adirondack chairs out back, daydreaming about the perfect man for him, and for the most part, his consciousness always envisioned the guy as tall, dark and brooding.

He'd come to think that was really what he needed, a guy that was serious. One that only Seth could get to let loose. He wanted someone with a secret smile only he knew how to provoke, a smile just for him. Seth started looking for this type of guy, but his current hometown didn't offer much in the way of gay men. Even finding a casual friend with some perks was nearly impossible. On a few occasions, he'd met an out-of-town camper or day hiker that fit the bill. but they only ever wanted to hook up, seemingly desperate to get rid of his chatty ass once they'd used it.

Seth sighed as he walked downstairs to gather Kashmir and Silver for some playtime. For now, his left hand and his small, but impressive, collection of toys would have to be enough for him. He opened the back door calling out “Ollie Ollie Oxen Free”. Kashmir and Silver raced out into the yard. There was a nip to the gentle breeze brushing against his skin. Spring in the mountains of

northern Washington wasn't that warm, but the cold had never bothered Seth. The grass under his bare feet was soft and comforting as he trailed after his rambunctious ferrets.

He took a deep breath and smiled. Despite having spent the entire day hiking and photographing anything that caught his eye, this was the most relaxed he felt all day. His yard was like a sanctuary. When he first arrived, the entire area around the cabin was overgrown with wild raspberries and a mix of thick weeds.

It had taken him, with the help of his dad, the better part of two years to get everything the way he envisioned it. He was pretty sure his gardens would make the people at Disney weep with envy. Seth took a moment to spin around, taking in the space that was all his. He felt completely at peace and connected to—well, everything.

The sound of Silver having a fit brought him out of his reverie. He laughed as he watched his girls fight over their favorite hidey-hole, a tiny hollow garden gnome Seth had hidden amongst the junipers that ran along the small decline that led from his stone patio, down onto the lawn. He'd cut a hole out of the back of the figurine so they could hide inside. He'd put extra effort into creating spaces for Kashmir and Silver to enjoy as well, finding creative and aesthetic ways to include gizmos and playthings into his landscape.

This was their favorite time of day, right before the sun set, when it was still warm-ish and light outside. Seth made sure he set aside this hour every day to bring them out to play. He went over and dumped Kashmir out of the gnome before running away towards the open lawn, looking over his shoulder to see them galloping after him. He threw himself down onto the soft grass face first, enjoying the feel of the ground underneath him. He swore he could feel tendrils of the earth's energy flowing into him.

That was, until all he could feel was sharp little claws and noses digging at him. His girls loved to tickle-fight and knew exactly where all his most ticklish spots were. Today Silver went for the skin behind his knee while Kashmir went straight for his armpit. Seth squirmed and laughed until he couldn't take it anymore. Carefully dislodging them, he got to his feet. Turnabout was fair play.

In the center of the yard was a large kidney-shaped garden. Seth planted things like Echinacea and black-eyed Susans there, as well as his favorite and most colorful annuals. He loved seeing the bright purples, yellows and pinks. The birdbath in the middle of the bed he'd picked for its earthy beauty. The

bowl was ceramic and large, with a thick rim and a few inches of depth. It rested on a pedestal of wood that had an intricate carving spiraling from the base all the way to the top of the basin's edge.

Standing next to the bath, Seth clicked his tongue a couple of times to get Kash and Sil's attention. When they looked up at him, he pulled his hand out of his pocket and dangled a small plastic ball that rattled. "Wanna play a little game?" he asked, deepening his voice to sound creepy, like the killer from *Saw*. Too bad it came out sounding more like Christian Bale as Batman. Not an attractive sound. The girls raced over towards him but, rather than tossing the ball for them, he dropped it in the center of the water, making a tiny splash. The racing ferrets scurried up the birdbath's pillar and came to a dead stop at the top, where they perched along the rim and glared at him.

Neither of them liked to get wet, so they both reached the top and just sat there, studying the situation. Silver turned her head to make eye contact. Seth just smiled as her beady little eyes narrowed, seemingly saying "You're an asshole." She turned back towards the water and dipped her front paw in, using it to flick water at Seth. Message received. Seth didn't have to stand for the abuse. The first wet splatter of water hit him, but he managed to dodge the rest by leaping around. Seth laughed at the thought of someone seeing him like this, like some kind of psychotic ballerina doing pliés and pirouettes around the yard.

Kashmir, seeing what her sister was up to, joined in the fun, but instead of trying to splash Seth, she flicked the water at Silver. With a hiss of disapproval, Silver launched herself at Kash, who took off like a furry little rocket. They chased each other around the rim of the birdbath several times before Silver attempted to outsmart her sister by stopping and changing directions. Kashmir, surprised when she saw Silver coming right at her, tried to turn around too but ended up ungraciously dumping herself in the water.

She squeaked and started scurrying out of the water, but then must have remembered the toy floating in the center of the pool. Just as she neared the ball, Seth snatched it out of the water. He chuckled at the sight of a sopping wet Kashmir and a pissed-off Silver giving him the evil eye. He swore Kashmir harrumphed while her sister seemed to say "What did you do that for?"

"You didn't think it would be that easy, did you?" Seth answered the unspoken question. He took off running when both Silver and Kashmir bolted down the pedestal onto the grass, darting full speed towards him. "This is

Sparta!” Seth yelled before kicking the ball across the lawn. As the girls raced each other for the toy, Seth broke into a quick little dance; one he called the Ferret Don't Give a Crap Dance. He jumped back and forth and tried to imitate the tiny dooking noises ferrets make. It wasn't like anyone was around to see him, and it felt good to just act crazy and uninhibited.

When the girls came running back towards him, Silver with the toy in her mouth, he leapt in front of her and scooped her up, taking the toy from her mouth before sitting her back down in the grass. As much as she whined and hissed, he knew she actually liked playing keep-away. This game, along with hide-n-seek and tag, were their favorites.

Seth took off, running to the very edge of the yard before swinging around and heading in the opposite direction. About halfway back to the patio, he pretended to trip, falling to the ground and letting the toy fly out of his hands. Getting to his knees he threw his head back and exaggeratedly screamed, “Noooooooooooo! My Precious!” into the dimming sky.

He collapsed forward and smacked his fist against the ground, continuing his Oscar-worthy meltdown while chanting “Why” over and over again. Kashmir and Silver both liked it when he made noise and acted crazy. They always seemed to know when he was just playing and when he needed a cuddle. Giving up on his Smèagol impression, Seth rolled over onto his back and looked at the sky. “Damn, I love it—” He was cut off when a dripping wet Kashmir ran across his face, her soaked fur getting in his mouth. He sat up, coughing, and wiped at his face with the back of his hand. “That was really gross, Kash,” he scolded the ferret, who he swore snickered at him before taking off to play some more with Silver.

While his babies entertained themselves, Seth took the opportunity to walk around and enjoy his gardens. He inhaled the fresh scent of his honeysuckle bush, enjoying the sting of nettle against his leg when he brushed by it and ran his hand over the soft petals of his favorite tea roses. He refilled his many bird feeders, as well as his squirrel feeder and salt lick. When that was all done, he grabbed his remote control monster truck from the ferrets' toy bin he kept on the back porch and plopped down in the grass to play.

When the sun finally began its descent behind the trees, Kashmir and Silver returned and crawled into his lap. He set them on his shoulders and got up to return his truck, before making his way to the stone slabs he strategically placed along the far eastern edge of his yard where the sun's rays remained the

longest, warming the stones' surface. He sat cross-legged on the smooth, warm surface and placed Kashmir and Silver each on their own smaller stone. They ended every evening the weather cooperated sitting here, soaking up the warmth and watching the sun set on another day and recharging for the next one.

For some reason, tonight Seth found his eyes flicking to the large empty stone next to him. When he and his father had designed the landscaping for his place, he'd included the extra stone for the partner he'd hoped to someday find. Seth's thoughts turned wistful, his relaxed mind conjuring up an image of a tall, dark stranger with golden eyes and rich brown hair.

Seth hadn't realized he'd closed his eyes until Kashmir and Silver nearly attacked him, scurrying onto his lap and hiding in the circle of his legs. When he opened his eyes, they nearly popped out of his head. He stopped breathing and his heart gave a heavy thud. Not twenty feet in front of him, prowling along the edge of the encroaching forest, was a creature that was at once both sinuously beautiful and completely terrifying. And right at that moment, it locked eyes with Seth. He found he was paralyzed, unable to move and unable to look away. He was utterly mesmerized by the golden eyes of a cougar.

Chapter Three

Mate! For the first time in nearly five years, Troy's human and cougar were on the same exact page. *Mine! Take!* The stretch and burn of his cat muscles made him feel alive as he barreled through the thick forest, following the unique scent of his mate. When the wind first carried the enticing aroma to him, it hit him like a drug injected into the vein of an addict, immediately bringing the stormy sea of his mind to a calm and gentle peace. The feelings of loss and sadness and thoughts of ending his life disappeared. Like the captain of a lost ship who spots the salvation of a glowing beacon from a lighthouse, he no longer felt adrift in the dark.

Troy's entire existence was focused on reaching his mate. He wanted to bite. He wanted to claim! Branches tore at his fur, his lungs burned. It wasn't until the clearing became visible that Troy realized where his nose was leading him. Despite wanting—*needing* to get to his mate, Troy ground to a halt, concealed just inside the woods that surrounded the small cottage.

He prowled back and forth, images of the past flitting through his mind: playing in the yard behind the cottage with his brothers while his mother and Cecelia sat laughing and drinking sun tea, his father, broken and mateless, raging through Cecelia's beloved gardens, the overgrown gnarled mess that had overtaken the cottage years later, leaving it feeling tainted, haunted.

Troy bared his teeth, sinking his claws into the earth, as the memories of that dreadful day and the misery that followed assaulted him over and over. His beast's instincts began to take over again. He wanted to destroy something! A snarl built in his chest, and he could feel his humanity slipping away again. Movement in the clearing drew his attention, his sharp vision focusing on an absolutely gorgeous redhead running around the now pristine yard.

The cougar inhaled deeply, the unique scent of the man stinging his nostrils. The darkness that had invaded his thoughts faded. The man was his mate, the one human being on this planet that both belonged to him and owned him at the same time. Slowly, silently he prowled closer.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he noticed how gorgeous the cottage was now. Troy shouldn't be surprised that the place eventually sold. The man had obviously been here for a while, if the meticulous gardens and fresh paint were any indication. It must have taken him years to fix the place up, but Troy

didn't care. The man was his and he would claim him and drag him back to his home. The thought of his mate occupying the same space where that Leshy bitch once lived burrowed under his skin and made him itch.

Mine! He moved closer to the clearing, intent on taking what was his. His fangs ached with the need to sink into his mate. Troy's beast wanted the man's blood on his tongue, wanted to taste, to take. His vision narrowed on the man's athletic body as he stalked forward between the trees. His mate was built perfectly, muscular but not bulky, tall and strong. His skin looked like white marble and his hair; it was a coppery red, like the color of autumn.

Claim him! Troy's paw landed on the ground just past the last row of trees. He moved silently, low to the ground. He tensed, ready to pounce. His lip curled back over his large, sharp teeth. *Mine!* His instincts screamed but just as he moved to burst into the clearing, his mate began jumping around. The sudden movement stunned Troy's beast and caused him to pause.

Was the man dancing? In the middle of the yard? *Okay. So my mate is a fool. Sexy as hell, but still a fool.* Troy stepped back into the forest once again as he watched the person fated to be his thrash and gyrate around in his bare feet. It was endearing and unpredictable, and it made Troy smile, even though he was in cougar form. That's when he realized how in control his human side was right then. He used the moment of clarity to think.

He could not approach his mate as a cougar. The man was not a shifter and Troy would frighten him. Shifting in front of him was definitely out, and walking out of the woods naked would likely—definitely—freak his guy out. Lost in thought, his human side didn't notice the two streaks of fur that raced towards his mate. His cougar, however, definitely did. He leapt forward, ready to race to his man's rescue, but quickly came to a stop when the sound of the redhead's laughter reached his ears.

Troy watched curiously as his mate scooped up one of the animals, a ferret he realized, and took something from its mouth before setting it back down and taking off running across the yard. Troy found himself completely intrigued by the man in front of him. Something in his chest shifted as he watched his carefree mate play with his pets.

He sat, like a housecat, and watched the man drive around a remote control monster truck, all the while making loud sound effects of tires screeching and an engine revving. Troy chuffed, the closest his cougar got to a human laugh, when his mate drove the toy, with the ferrets on top of it, towards himself and

then jumped out of the way yelling, "Watch out for innocent bystanders, you mad man!" while shaking his fist in the air.

No, Troy would not be claiming his mate today. He breathed deep, swallowing down the scent of his mate and using it to calm his beast, so he could convince both the human and the cougar that it was the right decision. The man was here. He was real. And Troy would use that knowledge to hang on a little longer, long enough to show the beautiful redhead what it meant to mate with a shifter and to convince him to give himself willingly.

Accepting his decision, Troy slunk between the trees and brush, continuing to watch his mate. His mind was clear and his beast was subdued, but that didn't mean his instincts were gone. He needed to watch over his mate and protect him, wanted to be near him. He would stay until the man went inside for the night, he rationalized with himself. While his beautiful ginger was safely locked up in his house, Troy would return home and figure out a way to introduce himself to the man as a human as soon as possible. The possibility of going feral still loomed without the mating bond complete. Troy needed to move things along quickly.

The sky grew dim and the sun began to dip down below the horizon. *Hmmm. Maybe this would go a lot quicker as a cougar.* It was clear that Troy's mate was an animal lover. He actually felt a little jealous of the affection the man showed his ferrets as he watched them curl into his lap while he sat soaking up the last of the sun's rays.

Troy settled on his belly in a patch of leaves and took in his mate. The man's skin and hair seemed to glow in the sun's fading rays. He wanted to run his tongue along the smooth, creamy muscles of the man's arms. He wondered if his mate would like the rough sandpaper of his cougar's tongue or prefer the soft velvet of his human one. Would he have the same fiery hair on his chest or was he smooth there as well? Did he like to cook? Enjoy the same horrible British sitcoms Troy did? What color were his eyes?

Before Troy even realized what he was doing, he found himself standing out in the open, just feet from his mate. So close to the man that his need to claim and mark him came surging forward, his animal instincts once again fighting to take control. He stood, his muscles rigid, as his human and cougar sides warred with one another. When his mate suddenly turned a startled gaze towards him, he froze, locked into place by the intensity of the man's dark green eyes.

Troy was losing. He was going to leap across the space that separated him from his mate and seal his fate by destroying any chance he had to build a

lasting relationship with the man. Another shifter would understand, but his mate wasn't a shifter! Troy was going to bite him, shift and fuck him. He was going to terrify him and quite possibly break him. Troy's paw lifted.

"Hello, putty tat." The calm voice brought Troy to a standstill, a shiver rolling down his spine. Hearing his mate speak directly to him for the first time was almost orgasmic. And then his words registered and Troy found himself cocking his head to the side. Did the guy just break out a Tweety Bird? His cougar raged a little at the insult. He was a fierce predator! He would teach his mate to respect his beast, show him he was to be feared.

Troy took a step forward. His mate tensed and scooped up his two rodents, holding them against his chest. This time when he spoke he used a country bumpkin accent. "A cougar killed my pa. Now see here, there's no way I'm a lettin' one get my babies, too. Ya hear? Now skit. Go on. Git outta here."

Troy's desire to laugh overrode his mating frenzy. That ridiculous southern accent and the man's absolutely ballsy behavior had Troy feeling lighter than air. His mate was interesting and funny. Troy imagined spending his lifetime with the sexy redhead and his quirky personality. But first, he had to win the man over, not give him a fucking heart attack, so he turned and bolted into the woods. He remained hidden until his mate went inside and then, reluctantly, made his way back home.

He shifted on his back porch and entered the kitchen off his deck wearing nothing but a smile on his face. He was smitten. His mate!! After all this time. And the man was hot as hell, loved animals and the outdoors, was cute and fun and *hot!* Troy's cock grew hard with the mere thought of his sexy mate and the man's amazing scent. He had to relieve himself right there on the kitchen floor, twice, before he could even attempt to think of what he should do next.

Sleeping was out of the question. He vibrated with nervous energy, and his thoughts rolled around his brain like marbles in a tin can. What should he say? What should he wear? Should he bring a gift? Troy went from room to room just wandering around and thinking about how differently his day had ended from what he had planned. His beast was still restless and threatening his control, but it was manageable now, with the knowledge of his impending mating.

Troy found some protein bars in the cupboard and ate them. He hadn't planned on needing any groceries and would have to find time to get to the store. He needed to provide for his mate. In fact, making a list of things to do

would help center him, so he got out a pad and pencil and started writing them down. Cancelling that damn email was the first thing he thought of. There would be no need to donate his estate. Everything he owned now belonged to his mate first.

Several hours later, Troy had a long list that included everything from fixing the loose basement step so his mate wouldn't fall to buying sunscreen to protect the man's fair skin. Dawn was less than an hour away now, so Troy showered and jerked off one more time in an attempt to relax enough to appear normal when he first introduced himself.

He dressed in his best pair of jeans, a tight black T-shirt and hiking boots. It was still a bit early but he figured he'd just take his time walking over there. The cool morning air calmed his heated skin, and the sounds of the woods around him soothed his nerves. Although it was still dark outside, Troy's cougar eyes allowed him to see just fine. The outline of the cottage loomed ahead. Troy still wasn't comfortable with the fact that the man bought, and was living in, the house of a Leshy, but his rational side knew it was just a building and nothing there could harm his mate.

Troy leapt up from the stump he'd just settled on. He had planned to wait for the sun to rise before he knocked on the door, but a light had flickered to life and that was all the reason he needed to approach the cottage. His mate was probably getting ready to go to work. Troy wondered what the guy did for a living and if it would keep him away from home for long hours each day.

Stomach in knots, he knocked on the door. When he didn't get a response, he simply knocked louder. Now that he was here, his instincts were clamoring for him to barge in and exercise his right to take and claim. He couldn't walk away. Troy knocked even harder. His skin felt tight with need. Thank God, the door finally cracked open, and the heavy up-close scent of his mate soothed his beast.

At least until his mate uttered the word "Fire". Troy began to panic, the overwhelming need to protect his mate screaming for him to grab the man and run. The man's next words almost didn't register. "As in, there better be one or else I'm going to be pissed."

"Oh, um," Troy stammered. This was so not going as smoothly as he planned. "No, no fire. Sorry." He stuck out his hand, dying for some skin-to-skin contact. "I'm Troy. Your neighbor. I just wanted to introduce myself."

The man's copper eyebrows rose and his lickable mouth fell open. He crossed his arms, refusing to accept Troy's offered hand. "At five o'clock in the morning?"

"I know it's early but..."

"Three years after I moved in?" His mate's voice was strained and that put his beast on edge, feeling the need to calm him.

"Your light was on." Troy pointed towards the spotlight that hung on the corner of the house like its existence would make him seem less crazy.

The door pulled open further and his mate stuck his head out, looking at the light like it offended him. "That's a motion light," he said slowly, enunciating each word and making Troy feel a little stupid. Not enough to walk away, of course, because who could blame him for wanting to be near this man.

When the door slowly began to creep closed, Troy scrambled for something to say. "Cougar," was all that came out. He swallowed, and a bead of sweat formed at the back of his neck. "Um. There's a cougar that's been wandering around this area. Just thought I should warn you, you know, do my neighborly duty and all."

The man's face hardened and Troy's beast responded in kind. Was he afraid? Had Troy truly scared him the night before? "It's a forest." His mate's voice matched the look on his face. "Of course there are mountain lions wandering around. I'm sure he means no harm, so just leave him alone."

What was this? His mate was defending his cougar? Troy's shock must have shown on his face because the amazing man standing in front of him raised his chin just a little. He must have mistaken Troy's pride at being defended by his mate for something else, because his stance said "So what are you gonna do about it".

"You may be right... I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name." Troy needed something from his mate in that moment. A name, a touch, anything.

"It's Seth." His shoulders relaxed and that made Troy's tension ease as well.

"Nice to meet you." Troy held out his hand once again. It hung there in the air for what seemed like an eternity. Troy could feel his thoughts shattering again. The animal side of him wanted to force himself on Seth, wanted to touch him all over, wanted to bite him. But the human in Troy held on and was rewarded when calloused fingers slid against his palm and wrapped around his hand. Troy took in every sensation, from the warmth that spread up his arm to

the tickle of the fine hair on the back of Seth's hand against his thumb. He closed his eyes for a brief moment to lock it all inside. It would be enough to get him through a little while longer.

Seth cleared his throat. "You too. Only, it would be much nicer, say, around eight a.m." The smile that accompanied his words took away the sting and made Troy's dick twitch. His mate was so gorgeous when he smiled. He wanted to scrape his nails across the red stubble along Seth's jaw and dip his tongue in the dimple on his left cheek. Of course, if he didn't figure out a way to spend some more time with the man, he wouldn't get a chance to do any of that.

"Sorry about that." Troy stuffed his hands in his pockets to keep from reaching out to pull Seth against him. "I just moved back to the area and the time change is messing with me so I was up and walking about. Besides, I was thinking about doing some outside work around the place, and it's best to do that early, before the sun makes it too hot."

Troy did his best to make his next sentence come out normal. The idea had just popped into his head, and he felt nauseous not knowing if Seth would take the bait. "Looks like you did a lot of work around this place. Last time I saw it, it was a disaster. I wish I could afford to pay someone to landscape my place too."

Seth yawned and stretched his arms above his head, revealing a strip of milky skin and a faint trail of copper hairs. Troy almost didn't catch him say, "Yeah, I didn't hire anyone. Did it myself. I could maybe come by and give you some advice sometime." Yes! Troy did a fist pump in his head. "Some normal time, you know, when all the nocturnal animals have gone to bed and it's us normal beings turn to be out."

"Sure. Yeah. Sorry again."

"No problem. Nice to meet you, Troy."

The shiver that tore through Troy's body at the sound of his name on his mate's lips threatened to shake him apart. It was another precious gem he would hold tight in the days to come, because he knew he had to walk away now or risk coming off as a pushy weirdo. "You too, Seth. I'll be around all week if you get the chance to stop over. I'm the last driveway on the left, before you reach Route three-twenty-nine. Big log cabin about a few miles back."

"Okay. Maybe I will. See ya." Seth closed the door but not before Troy got another glimpse of his flat stomach as he lightly scratched his abs.

Troy took a deep breath and turned to leave. During the walk back to his house, he ran every second he'd spent with his mate through his mind. He could feel the tug of his instincts urging him to turn around, but he held strong, reminding both halves of himself what all they'd gained. *Seth*. They knew his name now, knew he liked to work with his roughened hands, had an adorable dimple and that yes, he had red hair all over.

Four days later Troy was still running through all of this over and over, like some kind of bizarre chant. He didn't know how much longer he could keep from breaking apart. He'd really wanted Seth to come to him of his own free will, but the fact was, he was going to have to find a reason to go back to that cottage.

Well, go back to the door really, because he'd been there every day since that morning, keeping an eye on his mate from a distance and needing the visual awareness to keep his beast at bay. He'd learned a lot more about Seth as well, paid attention to every detail that could help him win the man over. He figured out the man had to be some kind of artist. He often came out to play with those little rats, with stains on his hands and a slight turpentine scent overlying his natural one. And he didn't leave the house for a regular nine-to-five kind of job.

Seth also loved to make fresh mint tea from leaves in his garden, to sing off-pitch with his windows open and to take naps on a hammock with the ferrets he seemed to love having around more than humans curled up on his chest. Troy often found himself wanting to shift and make a meal of the little beasts, especially when he watched, full of envy and jealousy, as Seth stroked them and spoke softly to them.

Probably not the best way to win him over, Troy thought as he hammered the nails into the wooden step he was replacing. Maybe I can take over some kind of weed and ask him if he knows how to get rid of it. Troy looked at the hammer in his hand. Or maybe I should smash my thumb and go ask him to help me wrap it. He raised the heavy tool high, but just as he was prepared to bring it down hard, a car door slammed behind him.

"Hey, Rooster, you're going to split the wood hitting it that hard." Seth's voice held a hint of laughter. How had Troy missed his approach? He must have been closer to losing it than he thought, but now that his mate was here, at his home, the world around him settled and he felt at peace.

"Rooster?" Troy stood and turned so he could take in the view of his man walking towards him, sun behind him so that he looked like he was glowing.

The sight made him ache with the need to touch him. He gripped the hammer tight and stood his ground. The man was here and that was a step in the right direction.

“Yeah, you know,” Seth smirked and shrugged his shoulder, “up before the ass crack of dawn and has to wake everyone within five miles up as well.”

Laughter echoed off the trees. Troy hadn't even tried to hold it in. The urge to hug his mate close hit him again, but this time it was different, born from a place of light and warmth, and not from the dark feral side of his nature. “True enough.” Troy clapped Seth on the shoulder when he stopped mere feet in front of him.

“So,” Seth started, “I was headed to town for some groceries and saw your drive, and figured I'd drop by and check you out—I mean check out your bed—your flower beds, I mean.” Seth let the air out of his lungs and looked away in embarrassment. The color that flooded his cheeks was brighter than any spring flower and made Troy want to lay his hands against it to feel the heat.

Troy moved to the side a little, bringing himself into Seth's peripheral vision when he spoke. “Well, my *beds* may not be as gorgeous as yours, but I hope you find something you like and can work with. I'd love to get your hands on them.”

“Definitely.” Seth turned back towards him and let his eyes roam the length of Troy's body, making it clear they were talking about more than landscaping, before walking off towards the gardens that lay in front of his porch.

Weeks later, Troy realized that day had been the beginning of the mating dance, the flirtation and feeling each other out, the building of tension. The day had been one of the best in Troy's entire life. They walked around his entire property, making small talk about the mountains, living so far from everything and what kind of plants and materials worked best for the climate. Troy had even managed to get himself invited along to town by mentioning some stuff he needed.

Riding in Seth's Jeep had been an exercise in restraint. Troy had to hide his erection as he watched his mate's muscular legs work the pedals and his veiny forearm flex when changing gears. He had jerked off with those visions dancing in his head at least a dozen times in the past three weeks, trying to keep the sharp sexual edge of his nature squelched.

The fact that he and Seth would be spending the entire night together tomorrow didn't help matters. They'd spent more and more time together in the days since Seth stopped by. They worked side by side in Troy's yard, texted and even ate together a few times. Troy did everything he could to "accidentally" bump into Seth, or find a reason to text him or drop by his cottage. But what made his heart skip a beat was thinking about all the ways Seth did the same thing.

He knew the hiking trip they planned for the weekend would take their budding friendship to the next level. What began as light flirtation had built to a nearly palpable tension between them. Troy noticed the increased frequency of touches, heated glances and sly readjustments in the last few days. His cougar was all but clawing its way out, wanting to make the next move. He planned to take a long run today in hopes that it would help him maintain control tomorrow.

Troy checked his bags again. He needed to be sure he had everything his mate could want or need. When he was certain he hadn't forgotten anything, he shifted and took off. He ran the trail that Seth had mentioned, checking for any problems or dangers. Doing stuff like that, things that fulfilled the beast's need to protect and provide for his mate, helped soothe the relentless drive of his instincts, enough so that he slept well that night, content with his efforts and wanting to be well-rested for the day ahead.

Seth picked him up just after dawn. Troy agreed to let him drive. He really did love watching him move, legs spread a little, the material of his shorts pulled taut across his thighs. He had to turn away and look out the window, leaning his head against the glass to cool down a little.

"What's the matter, Rooster?" Seth had taken to using the nickname for him often. "You nervous? The trail's not that hard. Promise." Seth's smirk was sexy as hell.

"Only thing I'm nervous about, fire crotch, is whether or not you'll be able to keep up."

Seth drove off the side of the road a little, throwing Troy against the door. He laughed when Seth gave him a dirty look and lightly punched him in the shoulder. He couldn't resist antagonizing him some more. "I see you have a redhead's temper too. Hope you brought a hat 'cause I hear bright colors really attract bees."

"Very funny, dickwadle." Seth chuckled and the sound went straight to Troy's gut, churning up all sorts of feelings there. Between his animal instincts

and his human heart, he was beginning to feel like he would break in half under the strength of his emotions. His mate was amazing, so funny and smart and playful. It hurt so bad to be away from him, but it was beginning to be painful to be around him, too; his want and need a sharp stabbing pulse under his skin. Troy wasn't sure how much longer he could keep his beast at bay.

"What's with the frowny face, Rooster?" Seth made his own mocking frowny face. "I was just teasing. Lighten up, sweetcheeks."

"I know that." Troy pushed away the dark thoughts that had once again churned to life inside him. He found it nearly impossible to not be happy when his mate was near. "I'm just confused as to what a dickwadle is."

"You know how penguins kind of waddle on their little orange feet when they walk?" Troy nodded and Seth continued. "Well, picture that but instead of a penguin imagine it's a dick waddling around on a set of big, hairy balls. That's you, hairy-balled dickwadle, when you poke fun at my ginger-tasticness."

Troy held his hands up in surrender. "Okay, I get it. No carrot top. No agent orange. Promise."

"Good." Seth turned his focus back on the road, and they drove in comfortable silence for a minute or two.

"Besides," Troy broke the silence, "I didn't mean it as an insult. After all, ginger is one of my favorite things to eat." This time when the Jeep swerved off the road, Troy was ready for it.

Chapter Four

Seth pulled off the main road and followed the all-terrain path to a clearing near one of the park ranger stations. He parked, shutting off the engine and turning to look at Troy, who was still wearing the shit-eating grin that took over his face when the man made him run off the road.

Damn, he's gorgeous. Troy had the bronzed, sun-kissed skin that Seth loved on a man. It made him think of days spent outdoors, physical labor and the beach. Troy's thick, rich brown hair and dark eyes definitely revved his little peter piper as well. A fact he would do well not to think about right at that moment, or else he'd embarrass himself when he stepped out of the car.

"So," Seth said, "the trail is just north of here. Looks like the weather is going to be perfect. This will be so much better than band camp!" He threw the driver's door open and bounced out, unable to contain his enthusiasm. Troy chuckled as he came around the other side of the Jeep and joined him. They stretched out the kinks from the two hour drive. Seth wanted to hump Troy's leg like Lassie when the man arched his back, exposing the perfect V leading down into the waistband of his shorts.

Troy caught him looking, the bastard, but he just shrugged it off and opened the Jeep's hatch to grab their gear. Seth's favorite backpack and tightly rolled sleeping bag took up very little space, and thank heavens, because Troy's was fucking huge. "Jesus, Rooster," Seth poked at the overstuffed bag, "did you pack a sherpa in here? We're only going for a day, man."

Poking him in the ribs, Troy shot back, "Yeah, but you're kind of a goofball so I had to pack for every contingency. I've got a first aid kit with plenty of calamine lotion, too."

Seth swung his pack onto his shoulders. "Come on, man, I swear I never got poison ivy before! I never use gloves when I garden. I like to *feel* stuff and get my hands dirty. How was I supposed to know you have some kind of superior strain of poison growing in your mutated yard."

"Well, I think you learned your lesson." Troy easily slung his giant bag over his broad shoulders, proving all those glorious muscles weren't just for show. "I've never seen hands look like that! You looked like some hideous, blistery lagoon monster from a really bad B-grade movie."

Seth put his arms out in front of him Frankenstein style and made some cheesy monster sounds, distracting Troy with the show so he could get him into a headlock. He rubbed his heel against Troy's head. "Say mercy!"

"Never, Godzilla!" Troy squealed. He shoved at Seth's chest, trying to get him off and in the squabble somehow ended up scraping his thumb nail over one of his nipples. Seth moaned a little, and they both froze before he released his grip on Troy's head and turned to close the hatch door.

"I, um..." Seth had to clear his throat before he could finish. "I just need to stash my keys, and then we can get going." He walked towards a nearby tree and started climbing it.

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

Seth was surprised by the angry tone of Troy's voice. "I always hide my keys like this." He straddled the first thick branch he came to and tied the keys around the limb. "That way if we get attacked by wood sprites or angry grizzlies and lose all our stuff, we can still drive back home."

"And what happens when you fall and break your neck and can't drive anyways?" Troy called up from where he stood right underneath Seth, looking like he was prepared to catch him if he fell.

Seth had noticed how much of a worrywart Troy was. He kind of liked knowing the guy worried about him, but this was getting a little ridiculous so he decided to make a point. He stood up on the limb, which was only about ten feet from the ground, and did a backflip off of it, landing behind Troy. His knees jarred a little, but it was totally worth it. The look on Troy's face when he spun around was priceless.

"Jesus H. Are you insane?" Troy surprised Seth by grabbing him and hugging him tight. "Don't ever do that again."

Not the reaction Seth had expected. He didn't know whether to be pissed at Troy for getting all overprotective-mama-bear on him or to feel a little cherished. "I'm fine." Seth extricated himself from Troy's strong arms. "My parents put me through years of gymnastics when I refused to stop climbing and swinging off everything. They figured if they couldn't stop me they at least wanted me to learn how to land."

Troy released the breath he seemed to be holding and some of the tension bled from his body. He started walking in the direction of the trail. Seth barely heard him mumble, "They should have just tied you down."

Jogging to catch up to his surly neighbor, Seth shoulder bumped him. "Where would the fun be in that?"

"Life can't be all about fun." Troy scooped a twig up off the ground and snapped it in half. "There's nothing fun about broken bones or bloody gashes. Goofing around gets people killed."

Seth took a moment to process that before he spoke. "You sound like you're talking from experience." Troy's shrug didn't really confirm or deny, and Seth didn't like the dark turn the conversation had taken. "Well, I'm sorry if that's been your experience, but I think if a person has a chance to feel alive, to take in the energy around them and, for even a moment, be happy and carefree then I doubt they regret the consequences."

They walked across the clearing and into the woods in silence. Troy looked to be deep in thought, so Seth let him go for the moment. He was trying to think of a way to salvage things when Troy finally spoke. "Thank you. I never really thought of it that way. It's kind of nice knowing that maybe she lived her life to its fullest and died having been happy." Seth desperately wanted to ask Troy more, but he got the message that the man didn't want to discuss it any further when he took off running, calling over his shoulder, "Last one to the trailhead is a rotten egg."

For about an hour, they kept up a quick and steady pace. They talked almost nonstop about everything and anything, from their favorite Monty Python quotes to the best kind of tackle to use for catching trout, but they could have done that sitting in the kitchen back home. They were in the middle of one of the most beautiful forests in America on a perfect sunny day. Seth wanted to explore, to look and touch and marvel at the world around them, and he wanted to share it all with the sometimes broody dark-haired man beside him.

He veered off the path towards a moss-covered log that caught his eye. It took Troy a few seconds to realize Seth wasn't next to him any longer, but as soon as he did, he backtracked and came up next to him. "Is something wrong?" Troy asked right away. Seth wasn't sure why the guy always seemed to think the worst, but he would bet it had something to do with what he mentioned earlier.

Seth had the strongest urge to reach out and caress Troy's cheek, soothe his worries and reassure him that he was fine. He settled for telling him, "No, nothing at all. This just caught my eye and I wanted to get a closer look. I've never been able to replicate the feel of moss in my paintings." Seth ran his hand

across the soft, spongy surface and smiled when Troy reached out to do the same thing. "I can get all the colors right. I just don't know how to make it *feel* right, you know."

"I don't know," Troy's fingers brushed against Seth's as he spoke. "The little I've seen of your work is pretty amazing. I bet you're just being too hard on yourself."

"Thanks." Seth smiled. The words hit him right in the chest, but the touch, it went straight to his balls. He'd never wanted anyone so much as he did Troy. It was starting to scare him a little, especially since he could feel the kind of primal connection with him that he'd always believed he could feel with nature. Damn his hippie parents for turning him into a free-spirited freak. Reaching into his bag, he grabbed his camera and took a few steps back in order to capture the best angle.

"I should have known you would bring that thing," Troy chuckled.

"Of course, it's what I do." A frown creased Seth's face. "Does it bother you?"

"Not at all." Troy was quick to ease his concerns. "I think it's cute."

"Cute?" Seth said incredulously, and then thought better of it. "Well, I guess that's not the worst thing a guy's ever said about me."

"What do you mean?" Troy asked as he turned to sit on the fallen tree trunk. When he looked up at Seth, face open and earnest, Seth raised his camera and snapped a picture.

"Well," Seth lowered the camera and looked right into Troy's eyes, "most people—most guys, at first they like how into nature and the outdoors I am. They put it together with my size and the cottage in the woods, and they think I'm some kind of burly, lumberjack type. But then they spend some more time with me and they realize I'm more the bleeding-heart, tree-hugger type, and they get turned off pretty quickly. Even then, if they still hang around, the way I see the world eventually leads them to running away while calling me weirdo or freak." Seth looked away, taking pictures of the moss now and trying to hide how nervous he was waiting for Troy's response.

Troy's chest took over the viewfinder of Seth's camera as the man stepped in front of him and pushed his arm down, forcing Seth to lower the camera and face him. "I don't think there's anything wrong with the way you are, Seth. I'm just as connected to the earth as you are, even if I take it for granted

sometimes.” Troy lifted his hand and rested it on the back of Seth’s neck, applying just a little bit of pressure and pulling Seth’s head forward.

Seth thought maybe Troy was going to kiss him, and he wet his lips in anticipation. He was disappointed when Troy simply placed a chaste peck on his forehead and then took a step back. “So,” Troy’s voice was a little raspy, letting Seth know he wasn’t completely unaffected, “what do you say we take our time the rest of the way to the peak, and you can show me some more of the sights I’ve been missing.”

Seth never enjoyed a hike more than he did the next few hours. The sky was a clear blue, the sun warmed his skin, and the air between he and Troy stayed light and carefree. Seth took tons of pictures, sneaking in a few of Troy’s natural beauty as well.

At first Seth pointed out all sorts of things that Troy may have just walked on by, but after a while, Troy started making his own finds. It kind of became a game between them to see who could find the most interesting thing. Troy spotted a butterfly with speckled lime-green wings, and Seth brought their attention to a pair of bald eagles and their nest.

They laughed and joked and shoved each other around a little. They ate their lunch sitting on a huge moss-covered boulder, the whole time playing the cloud game. At one point Seth swore he saw a puffy white cloud shaped like a platypus, but Troy argued it was a seal balancing a ball on its nose. Agreeing to disagree, they packed up and moved on.

About three-quarters of the way up the mountain, they came across a small creek. Seth moved along the rocky edges searching amongst the stones and other debris. “What are you looking for?” Troy inquired before dipping his hands in the cool water and wiping them over his face.

“You know what petrified wood looks like?” Seth asked him.

“Yeah, of course. Never found any myself, but I’ve seen some in the museum.”

“Well, you know how it formed when lava flowed into water and everything?” Seth felt silly admitting the next part and could feel his cheeks heating. “So anytime I come across a creek or stream, I like to see if I can find any. It’s, um, really beautiful.”

“That’s cool.” Troy joined him in his search, only to give up a few minutes later. “You know, I’m pretty sure they sell it in different places.”

Seth chucked a rock at him, making sure it didn't come too close to hitting him. "Of course they do! It's the memory that counts. I want to be able to look at it and say 'I remember when I found that'."

"I can see that," Troy said after thinking about it. Seth knew that Troy really did understand when he doubled his efforts to find some. Even with two of them looking as far along the creek shore as they could without getting too far off track, they didn't find a single piece of the million-year-old marbled wood.

Once they were back on the trail, Seth decided he would just have to find another way to remember this particular trip, not that he would be forgetting this day anytime soon. "Hey, Troy," Seth called from where he lagged behind.

"What's up?" Troy jogged the few feet back to him.

"Go sit on that tree," he told Troy, pointing at a huge tree a few feet off the path. The trunk of the tree split about four feet off the ground, and it continued growing in two different directions, making a perfect seat.

"Okay. But only because I like it when you're bossy." Troy winked at him before taking off his backpack and heading through the brush to the tree. Placing his hands on the space where the wood split, he pushed himself up with his arms and sort of hopped, turning his body so that delectable ass of his landed right on the flat seat. Troy's bent legs were just a bit too short for his feet to touch the ground and for some reason Seth found that adorable.

"Now what?" Troy threw his arms up in the air.

Seth didn't bother responding verbally, he just raised his camera and started snapping photos.

"Why did I even bother asking?" Troy sighed before waving Seth over. "Come here."

It never even occurred to Seth to question it; he lowered his camera and went to Troy, who pulled him into the space between his dangling legs. "You've been taking photos of me all day," Troy said, "but you haven't been in a single one."

Seth made a strangled noise in his throat, but it didn't stop Troy from turning Seth around and pulling him back against his rock solid chest. When Seth relaxed back against him, Troy slid his arms around Seth's waist and pulled them even closer together, his palms flat on Seth's stomach, causing him to fumble his camera and nearly drop it.

When Seth got control of himself and had the camera turned around towards them, Troy put his head on Seth's shoulder and said, "Say cheese sticks!"

Seth was so distracted by Troy's body heat and finally getting the man's hands on him that he was barely able to snap the photo. "Better take a few," he mumbled, "in case I cut off our heads or we have crazy eyes or something." Troy laughed and Seth felt himself smile. He kept his finger pressed down the entire time, instinctually knowing that these photos would be some of the best he'd ever taken.

About fifteen minutes later, neither of them were smiling or laughing anymore. They'd come to the point in the trail that veered right, taking them around a rocky incline the rest of the way to the top. Seth planned to climb the steep slope, which Troy quickly informed him he would not allow.

"Excuse me?" Seth's voice was low and the words came out slowly.

"It's too dangerous." Troy began pacing back and forth, hands clenched into fists, stretching his neck and rolling his shoulders. It looked to Seth like he was trying to get control of himself. Maybe he was afraid of heights or simply didn't think he could do it, but it was a small climb and Troy was in great shape. Seth had no doubts about either of their abilities to make it to the top, but he didn't want to make Troy do something the guy clearly didn't want to.

"Fine," Seth capitulated. "I'll climb up from here and you can take the trail. I really enjoy it but, if you're not comfortable, I understand. We'll meet at the top." That seemed like a reasonable compromise to Seth. It would only take him about a half an hour to climb and a little bit longer for Troy to walk.

"You think I—" Troy stopped pacing and looked at Seth. "I'm not—It's barely thirty feet up! I'm not scared to climb."

"Okay." Seth smiled wickedly, not believing for one second that Troy was being honest. The man had look petrified when Seth said he planned to climb. "Let's get going then."

"No," Troy's voice was firm. "I don't care if I have to throw you over my shoulder and carry you the rest of the way up. You are not taking such an unnecessary risk."

Seth was dumbfounded. "Are you—is it *me* you're worried about?"

"Absolutely." Troy stepped up to Seth and cupped his face in his hands. "Look, I can't explain it but I have a very deep need to protect you. I've seen what can happen when you do the fun things instead of the safe ones." Troy

swallowed and looked away. "My mother used to come home bruised and battered every time she went on another one of her thrill-seeking adventures." He turned to face Seth again, staring right into his eyes. "Until one day, she didn't come home at all."

All Seth could do was look into the dark depths of Troy's eyes. He couldn't find the words to express how much seeing Troy's pain made him hurt as well. But he also knew he would never be happy in a bubble. "I'm so sorry that happened, Troy. So sorry." Seth pulled Troy to him and squeezed him hard before letting him go. "But please don't use it to cage me or yourself." And with that Seth was done with the dark and serious that had settled over them. "Besides, I'm bigger than you. I doubt you can carry me all the way, and can you imagine how ridiculous that would look?"

Seth watched as Troy seemed to war with himself. He knew that dark, primal nature he'd seen in Troy wanted to control him. He just hoped to God that part of him didn't win. When Troy looked in Seth's eyes and told him, "I'm serious. I'll do it," his heart nearly broke from disappointment until he saw the smirk on Troy's face.

"You can try." Seth winked.

They ended up rolling around in the leaves, wrestling each other for dominance. It was all very playful, but Seth couldn't help but feel a little sexual undertone to it all. He did his best to keep his rapidly hardening cock from touching Troy. Eventually Troy ended up on top of Seth, between his legs. The air suddenly shifted from cool to steaming. They both stopped laughing and just looked at one another as Troy lowered his hips against Seth's. Their moans seemed to echo off the mountain.

Not one to give up, Seth took advantage of the distraction and flipped Troy onto his back. He ground their dicks together a little bit. "Tell you what, how about we compromise. We climb. Together. But I know I saw some rope and stuff in your bag so we can take it slow and wear harnesses."

Troy's thoughts played out across his face so that Seth knew the exact moment Troy gave in. "Deal. But don't think you'll always be able to win." Troy grabbed Seth's ass and slammed their hips together hard and ground their bodies against each other.

Seth gave as good as he got. "Wouldn't dream of it, Rooster." He tweaked Troy's nipple before clambering to his feet, not wanting things to go too far just yet. Seth held his hand out and helped Troy to his feet, where they proceeded to

selflessly brush the leaves off each other's asses before gearing up and attacking the climb.

Almost an hour later, Seth grabbed Troy's outstretched hand and helped haul him the rest of the way to the top. They lay on their backs in the cool grass, both panting a little and smiling a lot. Seth's eyes kept wandering over the glistening muscles of Troy's arms, so thankful the man wore a tank top. He had the richest golden skin, and Seth wanted to lick the sweat from it. Too bad the climb had taken nearly twice as long as he'd expected and they needed to get moving in order to set up their tent before the sun went down.

Seth slapped Troy's stomach with the back of his hand. "Well, I know one thing for sure. I definitely will not be calling you Billy in the future. You climb more like a fish than a goat." He jumped to his feet before Troy could retaliate.

"Aw, come on, man, that's not fair," Troy whined. "You would have slipped a few times too if you'd been the one looking up at that tight ass of yours the whole time."

Seth tripped over his own feet and turned to glare at Troy, who laughed at his stumble. They found a nice, flat spot for their tent and worked together seamlessly to get it all set up, the whole time talking about their first times sleeping out under the stars as children. When they had everything finished with the tent, Seth worked on getting a fire going while Troy got out the food he'd packed for dinner.

Seth was surprised and touched when he saw the things Troy packed. He had Tupperware containers filled with all of Seth's favorite fresh veggies and soy dogs to cook on sticks over the fire. He brought all the fixings for s'mores and two jars of applesauce, one for each of them. He even brought some of Seth's favorite loose Golden Monkey tea and a strainer for it.

As the sun slowly set behind the trees they sat, legs dangling over the edge of the mountain, to enjoy their meal together. As soon as Seth settled, Troy turned to him and said, "Thank you."

"For what?" Seth asked around a bite of soy dog in his mouth.

"For today. For showing me things through your eyes, all the beautiful and amazing stuff I would have walked right by. For talking me into climbing and for that incredibly sexy view of your ass." Troy nudged Seth with his shoulder. "I like you, Seth. A lot. You balance me out perfectly."

Slowly swallowing the bite in his mouth so he didn't choke, Seth turned to look at Troy, who was looking ahead, out over the forest. "I really like you,

too,” Seth admitted. “You know, for a brooding control freak, you’re not totally unbearable.” He bumped his shoulder against Troy’s, letting him know he was merely teasing.

They ate the rest of their food in silence. It was strange how comfortable and right that felt. Seth was afraid he was falling really damn hard and fast. Lost in his thoughts, he didn’t notice Troy pulling an object from his pocket until he felt it being placed in his hand. Seth looked down at the piece of petrified wood taking up his entire palm. The original brown of the wood was mottled with reds and oranges. It was beautiful.

Seth jerked his eyes up to Troy’s but couldn’t speak. Troy’s face radiated warmth and something more when he spoke. “This moment right here, I wanted you to have something to remember it by.” Seth curled his fingers around the gift in his hand and took Troy’s hand in his other as they sat together and watched the last rays of the sun dip below the horizon. At least Seth knew he wasn’t the only one falling.

Chapter Five

Troy reveled in being alone with his mate under the clear, starlit skies above the mountains of Washington. The day had gone better than he'd ever dreamed, despite a few rocky moments. The control he had right now over his beast was remarkable, and he had Seth to thank for it. The man was like a beacon in the dark, and once Troy opened up to allow him in, light shown on the whole world, chasing away the dark and scary.

Laying back on a blanket next to the fire, pointing out constellations and making up stories about where they came from, Troy knew he would be claiming his mate soon. They were perfect for each other and he knew Seth was feeling the same way. Troy told himself it would only be a little longer now, he could be patient.

"So," Seth pointed at a bright white star just above the dark treetops and traced it with his finger to some other stars, "that one there is a pissed-off T-rex chasing its tail because he's paranoid his tail is out to get him so he wants to get it first. And over there, that swoop of stars? That's the little mermaid. I know because we both have luscious red hair and our tails bring all the boys to the yard." Seth wiggled his hips. "Oh, and there's a really rare winking star!" Seth gasped. "No, wait, that's just an airplane."

Troy laughed so hard his muscles cramped. "Please, no more," he managed to get out between spasms. Finally getting control of himself, he was able to get some air into his lungs only to have his breath stolen when Seth suddenly leaned over him, braced on his outstretched arms. Troy reached up and grabbed him by the back of the neck, pulling him down.

Just as their lips were about to touch, Troy released his grip. Both the cougar and the man needed Seth to be the one to choose, needed him to be the one to close the gap. Seth didn't disappoint. His lips barely touched Troy's; they were a little dry from the day spent in the sun, but it didn't detract from the moment. The slight rough scrape actually ramped Troy up, appealing to his primal nature.

He lifted his head a bit, chasing contact, and flicked his tongue against the slight indent just under Troy's full bottom lip. Seth responded by sucking Troy's upper lip into his mouth and biting down on it, just enough to sting.

Kissing his mate was the greatest pleasure Troy had ever known. They lay there, surrounded by the glow of the crackling fire and the sounds of the forest,

and kissed for what seemed like hours. At times it was hard and needy, but at others it was gentle and sweet as they learned each other's mouths with their own and the planes of one another's faces with their fingers.

Their movements eventually slowed and they moved into the tent. "Troy?" Seth's voice was a little raspy.

"Yeah?"

"Would it be okay if we zip our bags together? I'm kind of a cuddler."

Troy chuckled. If he could see Seth's face in the light, he would bet it was that bright rosy color he'd come to love. "Need me to be your teddy bear, huh? S'okay. I don't mind at all."

They crawled between the cool material of their bags, Seth laying with his head pillowed on Troy's chest as he drifted to sleep.

Troy lay awake a little while longer, letting the strands of Seth's silky hair slip through his fingers. The thrum of arousal still simmered through him from their intense make out session, but Troy was happy to let it burn. He would not be claiming his mate tonight, even if it was the only thing that would satisfy him. As he laid there, ensconced in the heat and scent of his mate, his beast came close to purring and Troy was perfectly content to wait until the time was right.

Things remained much the same in the light of the morning. A small part of Troy feared they would take a few steps back once the cover of dark was lifted, but he awoke to Seth running his nimble fingers over his chest and along every groove of his abs. They shared a few post-breakfast kisses and talked like the best of friends as they made their way down the mountain and back to Seth's Jeep.

The two-hour drive home seemed more like twenty minutes, and by the time Seth pulled off the main road onto Troy's drive, he was feeling a little sick in the stomach at being separated from his man. "Wow, we made great time." Troy tried to fill in the tense silence.

"Yeah." Seth cleared his throat. They pulled up in front of Troy's log cabin, and Seth got out to help him get his things. Troy shouldered his pack and just stood there as Seth closed the hatch and turned to give him a hug goodbye. Troy's heart sped up and he swore he could hear Seth's do the same. There was an awkward moment when the hug had gone on too long so they reluctantly eased apart.

The growl that let loose from Troy's throat caught him by surprise. The beast's anger and possessiveness hit him like a ten-ton truck. It did not want to allow their mate to walk away.

"Oh, God," Seth gasped. "I'm so sorry! You should have said something if you were hungry. We could have stopped for a bite on the way back."

"Guess I didn't realize until we stopped." Seeing an opening, Troy took a chance with his next words. "I could run into town and grab us some Thai if, you know, you're hungry too. And if you're not sick of me yet."

Troy swore he saw Seth's shoulders relax right before he grabbed Troy and put him into a headlock. He scrubbed his knuckles against Troy's scalp and said, "Aw, Rooster, just admit you're gonna miss me. Come on, admit it."

"All right, all right," Troy squawked and Seth let him go. Troy grabbed him and pulled him close, kissing his lips, his chin and his jaw. Mouth next to Seth's ear, Troy whispered, "Is it so wrong that after thirty-six hours together, I'm still not ready to let you go?"

"Well, why didn't you just say so?" Seth grabbed Troy by the ears and planted a hard, smacking kiss on his lips. "I'll take some of that red curry and coconut shrimp and a side order of chicken skewers." He hurried around to the driver's side and got in but before he backed out, he rolled his window down and yelled, "And if you want to be accepted into the family, you could pick up some extra raw chicken for Kashmir and Silver!"

Troy did, of course, ask the cashier for some uncooked chicken to go along with their meals. The young woman looked at him like he was a little crazy, but if it meant making Seth happy, Troy would ask for just about anything. The ferrets themselves he had a love/hate relationship with. They were fun and cute and Seth loved them, but Seth loved them and it made Troy a little jealous and possessive, as ridiculous as that may be. He knew a lot of those feelings would ease up once he finally claimed the man, even if he had no intention of letting Seth in on that fact. Antagonizing his mate about his pets was a lot of fun.

The drive back to Seth's house seemed to take forever. Troy felt the familiar itch of his beast under his skin, like it was prowling back and forth looking for a way out. He hadn't thought about the possibility that spending all this time with Seth would have a negative effect on the tenuous hold he had on his humanity once they parted ways.

He could see now that being with his mate only made being away from him that much harder. The last few weeks, and particularly the last few days, had all

but convinced Troy that Seth would accept him. Maybe the mating would need to take place sooner than he'd planned.

It was with that thought rolling around his mind that Troy pulled up to Seth's cottage. He grabbed the sack of food off his passenger seat and practically ran to knock on Seth's door, needing to smell, see and hear his mate. "It's open," he heard Seth call out and opened the door. Two little furballs immediately assaulted him, skittering around his feet.

"Well, hello to you, Thing One and Thing Two," Troy said sarcastically.

"Be nice," Seth called from the kitchen area.

"I hope you're talking to the furballs," Troy called out, "because they're climbing up my pant legs, and I'm fighting my protective instinct to cover my assets." He was actually surprised that Kashmir and Silver's own protective instincts didn't make them more cautious around him, knowing they could likely smell the predator in him. As ornery and rambunctious as they were, they probably either thought they were invincible or they were too stupid to be afraid of him.

When the girls hung off his leg trying to get at the bag in his hand, he realized they were less concerned about the scent of cougar and more concerned with the smell of their dinner. He scooped each of them up in his free hand and set them back down on the floor before kneeling and giving them a quick rub and then slowly walking into the dining area, avoiding squishing the eager ferrets along the way.

Seth was just finishing setting out plates and silverware by the time Troy made it the short distance. He tossed the food on the table, hung his jacket over the chair and walked right up to Seth, sliding his fingers into the slightly damp strands of his hair and pulling him down for a kiss. His beast immediately relinquished its stranglehold on Troy's body, especially when Seth reciprocated by grabbing Troy's ass and pulling their bodies together. Troy moaned, and Seth didn't hesitate to push his tongue into Troy's mouth.

The sound of a bag rustling caught both their attentions. "Ladies," Seth gasped, "that is not very good manners." Seth removed them from the table and put them back on the floor before grabbing some extra plates and dividing up the chicken between them. Troy barely held back a groan when Seth bent over right in front of him to place the plates on the floor.

The heat of their greeting still flowed through his veins, but his more protective instincts kept him from acting on it. His mate was likely starving,

and Troy needed to make sure he was fed and taken care of before anything else, despite how much he wanted to continue where they left off. Apparently Seth had the same thoughts because he palmed Troy's ass when he came back into the room and growled in his ear, "You know what my favorite meal was when I was a kid?"

"I have no idea." Troy swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing.

"Opposite Edibles. It's when you get to devour your dessert before the main course."

Damn, Troy really wanted to go there but he knew in the back of his mind he'd be thinking about his mate's other physical needs, like food and—yeah, that's all he could come up with at the moment. "Let's eat first," Troy's voice came out huskier than he expected. "And then maybe we can play some Jenga."

"Fine," Seth huffed and it was adorable. Troy would never get tired of discovering new aspects of the man. Like his sadistic side, which came through when he finished with, "But the loser has to submit to five minutes of tickling by the winner."

Unable to stay sullen for long, Seth's warm and sunny disposition quickly returned as they ate their spicy meal together. Troy loved the way their legs constantly brushed against one another under and the table and the fact that Seth felt comfortable enough to drink out of his glass after he'd emptied his own. But to Troy, the thing that was more meaningful than all of that was the simple contentment of being in each other's company.

They talked. They *listened*. Seth told him about his laid back, drug-free, super-hippie parents and how they all slept outside so often in the summer that on more than one occasion someone reported them to the police as homeless squatters. Troy found himself sharing stories about his own family as well, leaving out the part about them shifting into cougars of course. For the first time ever, Troy didn't feel that familiar wash of despair that always came over him when he thought about his brothers, mother and father.

It was a bittersweet relief to be able to remember the time his brothers took him to the field with the shotgun to teach him how to shoot. They'd told him to prop his shoulder against the trunk of a tree for support, knowing full well that when the gun kicked back it would hurt, but not as much as the ass whooping they got after his parents had to run him to the hospital with a broken collarbone. When Troy finished telling the story, he wiped tears of laughter and

happiness from his eyes. With his mate by his side, he knew the raw, open wound of his past would soon heal.

Finished eating and ready to relax, they cleaned up the dishes and empty containers before moving into the living room where they set up the Jenga tower in the middle of Seth's coffee table. The ferrets curled up under the coffee table, resting between them, bellies stuffed and bloated. Troy couldn't decide whether he wanted to play to win or lose so he simply let the blocks fall where they may, which resulted in a check in the win column for Seth.

As long as his mate's hands were on him, Troy didn't really mind losing. Hell, Troy would have lost a game of chicken with a rhino shifter to get Seth to straddle his hips like he was doing right now. "You lost," Seth said in between quick, sucking kisses.

"Funny, I kind of feel like I won." Troy cupped the round globes of Seth's ass in his hands and squeezed.

"Nah ah," Seth tsked. "Hands above your head, mister," he ordered, grabbing Troy's wrists and lifting his arms above his head where he pinned them to the floor with one hand. "Now keep them there. It's the first rule of paying the tickle tax, no touching."

"Ung," Troy groaned, lifting his hips just a little so Seth could feel what he was doing to him. He knew, of course, if the wicked grin on his face was anything to go by.

"So, Rooster, I believe five minutes was the agreed upon time. You keep track of that, okay? I'm going to be busy."

Seth's nimble fingers dug into his ribs, wiggling and sliding around on the cotton of his T-shirt. Troy's legs jerked underneath Seth and he bit his lip to hold in the giggles. When Seth's hands moved upward, towards his exposed underarms, Troy was prepared for the assault. He withstood it for about thirty seconds before he gave up and writhed and twisted about, nearly bucking Seth off of him.

The next minute or so was a blur. Seth's hands were everywhere, behind his knees, running along the arches of his feet and at the spot where his neck and shoulder met. Troy was breathless from laughter and exertion. "Please," he begged, certain this was the worst kind of hell ever. Then Seth's movements slowed and Troy realized he hadn't known torture until that moment.

Pushing up Troy's shirt, Seth said, "Hmm, I don't think you're out of debt yet. You still owe me some tax. Perhaps a change of tactics is in order." He

stopped talking then, putting his mouth to better use. Troy shook his head back and forth, trying to unscramble his brain from the shock of Seth's tongue flicking over his nipple.

Troy arched his back and cried out when Seth took the pebbled bud between his teeth and bit down. Rules forgotten, Troy moved his hands to bury them in Seth's hair at the base of his neck, pulling him in closer and urging him to give him more. It was like putting a match to gasoline; the situation combusted, resulting in an explosion of kissing, grinding and biting.

Troy nearly came in his pants when Seth shoved his shirt up over his head so he could lick a line from Troy's belly button, through the grooves of his abs, over the ridges of his ribs and up across the patch of hair under his arm before biting the thick muscle of his bicep. When he repeated the move on Troy's opposite side, all bets were off.

Sitting up, Troy grabbed the hem of Seth's shirt and stripped it off over his head. Seth had the most amazing chest. His skin was nearly translucent up close, except for three freckles in the dip of his solar plexus and the deep peach of his nipples. "I love peaches," Troy growled before wrapping his lips around Seth's nipple, flicking it with his tongue.

Arms crossed behind Troy's head, Seth held Troy against him as he worked the man's chest with his mouth. At some point, their hips began rocking against one another. Troy scraped his nails down Seth's back, causing him to hiss. He wanted to bite, wanted to claim.

No! Troy did not want it to go like this. He wanted to make Seth his mate, but he wanted to do so honestly and openly, not by taking away the man's choice. It was a strange dichotomy. On one hand his beast wanted Seth, desperately, but on the other hand the man in Troy would not harm or force the man he loved in any way. And, yes, he loved Seth, both instinctually as his mate and emotionally as a human.

Unable to trust himself to continue on the lusty path down which they were headed, Troy rolled Seth underneath him and began tickling him like mad. Seth may have been surprised by the turn of events but he went right along with it, laughing and yelling out, "Uncle!"

The air whooshed out of Troy's lungs when Seth twisted his torso, exposing the skin of his left shoulder to Troy's gaze. He scrambled backwards off of Seth's lap, knocking into the coffee table and scattering Jenga pieces all over the floor. The sound of the blocks hitting the floor wasn't nearly loud enough to

drown out the noise of Troy's mind shattering into a million splintered pieces because there, on his mate's body, was a brown birthmark in the shape of a hand cradling a leaf. It was the marking of a Leshy.

"No, no, no," Troy's voice cracked with agony. Seth got on his knees and moved towards Troy, but he scrambled to his feet and backed away until he hit a wall. Troy grabbed handfuls of his hair, pulling it hard as he doubled over. "No, no. It can't be! Why?" Troy rocked back and forth mumbling to himself.

"God, Troy? What's wrong?" Seth's heavy hand landed on Troy's shoulder, causing him to jolt. He knocked Seth's arm away with bruising force and his beast roared. His cougar would not allow anyone, even himself, to hurt his mate, but right now, the human side of Troy was more lethal. Seth was one of them! A fucking Leshy!

"Don't touch me," Troy spat out. He could feel himself on the verge of shifting. He had to get out of there, so he shoved past Seth, grabbed his jacket from the chair, and ran out the front door. The air felt frigid against his overheated face, but it did nothing to cool the rage inside him. "Fuck!" Troy yelled. His car keys were not in his pocket and there was no way he could go back inside, he was barely hanging on.

His mate was one of his sworn enemies. His mind, unable to comprehend the revelation, began to splinter once again. Images flicked through his mind like a spliced reel of film, some fantasies and others nightmares. The first time he saw Seth standing out in the sun, only now his hair was flames and his hands like claws. The look of love on his mate's face when Troy handed him the piece of petrified wood. Seth, hands and face covered in mud as he cackled.

Shoulders hunched and head in his hand, Troy ran towards the woods. As soon as he was under the cover of foliage, he shifted, shredding his clothes and taking off at a sprint, anger and heartbreak fueling his body. He ran through the night and well into the next one before he collapsed somewhere near the Canadian border.

With exhaustion came some relief from the fury and pain that'd been gnawing at him. He lay there, completely still except for the rise and fall of his abdomen, and was able to finally think. He couldn't believe he hadn't noticed the signs before, his mate's earthy scent and the way he was with plants and animals. He should have asked how Seth came to live in that exact cottage. He was probably related to the crazy selfish bitch who killed his mom.

Had everything been a lie? A trick? Some kind of sick revenge? Troy's thoughts began to fan the dying flame of his anger again. He'd been a fool,

trusted his beast's instincts and let his fear of going feral control his choices. At least Troy would never again have to worry about that. The searing pain of his mate's betrayal would forever ground him in his humanity. The man was in charge now and he knew exactly what he had to do.

Chapter Six

For the first time he could ever remember, Seth felt true, bone-weary sadness. At first, when Troy freaked out and ran all but screaming out of his house three days ago, all he'd felt was confusion. He'd gone from being fully ready to give himself in every way to the man he'd fallen in love with, to completely alone in the blink of an eye.

He'd called Troy several times that night and gotten no answer. He barely slept, trying to figure out what had gone wrong and worrying about Troy being alone in the woods at night. He didn't figure out until the next day that Troy had not taken his car because Kashmir and Silver stole his keys at some point and hid them under the sofa.

When Troy didn't answer any of his calls again all that day, Seth decided to go to his house under the guise of returning his car. Troy wasn't there. Seth didn't know how he knew it, he just did. Visions of Troy out with another man assaulted him as he walked back home. He had himself so worked up by the time he got back to his place, he barely made it inside the door before he began sobbing uncontrollably.

Poor Kash and Sil tiptoed around him, nudging him with their noses. He could feel their worry and concern. And that's when he realized something was wrong. Something besides the obvious at least, but he couldn't focus enough to figure it out, so he did what his mother taught him to do when his mind spun out of control.

He went outside to the yard and sat right in the middle of the grass, legs crossed and hands resting face up on his knees. He concentrated on his breathing and did his best to clear his mind. The familiar feeling of being connected to the earth, of tendrils of energy feeding him and taking from him in perfect balance, was there, but there was a void as well. That wasn't right though, it was more like a cord that'd been cut.

When Seth opened his eyes something snapped into place. The day he first met Troy, he could swear he remembered feeling like they connected on a whole new level. He'd brushed it off as infatuation, but thinking about it now he felt crazy, because he would swear they'd been destined for one another.

Seth threw himself back on the ground, having no clue what the hell was going on. He decided to call his mom, mostly because she understood his view

of the world and could hopefully make some sense of the way he was feeling, but also because she was his mom, and he needed her.

“Hey, sweetie.” His mom’s voice soothed some of his frazzled nerves.

“Mom,” Seth’s voice squeaked and then he completely lost it, clutching his phone and crying. He’d always been a crier, taught at a young age that it didn’t mean anything about his strength, even if it did make him feel physically weak and wrung out when he was all done. “Sorry,” he sniffed. “I didn’t mean to freak out like that.”

“Seth, honey,” his mom spoke softly, “don’t apologize for your feelings. Just please tell me what’s wrong. I’m starting to freak out a little too.”

Seth told her all about his weekend with Troy and how everything felt so true and perfectly balanced. He laughed a little when he recalled for her how neither of them had wanted to part and how they came up with an excuse to continue their time together. His mirth didn’t last, however, when he remembered how Troy behaved just a few hours later.

When his voice grew hoarse and there was nothing else he could think of to share, he finally stopped talking and asked his mom for her thoughts. “I’ll be there in an hour,” was her only response before she hung up the phone.

It took two days for his mother to explain everything to him and answer all his questions. On the third day, he asked her to leave. He needed some space and time to process everything. Admittedly, he was a bit hurt and angry that his parents had hidden something so important from him. He believed her when she said they’d done it to protect him and allow him to forge his own path, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t still be pissed about it.

An entire week had gone by since learning he was actually born of a race of supernatural beings and that Troy was likely the only remaining son of a family of cougar shifters. He understood now why Troy left him, but it didn’t diminish the ache a damn bit.

Troy must have seen the mark on his shoulder that signified his heritage and, unlike Seth, he knew what it meant. Troy had quickly put it all together, like pieces of a puzzle, and realized Seth was the nephew of the woman he felt was responsible for the deaths of his entire family.

Seth longed for a chance to talk with him about it, to explain things the way his mom had, but he knew the opportunity would never come. His mom had thought maybe Seth was Troy’s mate based upon the things he’d told her. Seth

wished with all of his soul that it were true, because maybe then Troy would be drawn to him, maybe allow him a chance to prove they were perfect for one another.

He was trying to accept that he may never get that chance. Before his mom left, she made him promise he would allow the emotions to run their course but he would not wallow in self-pity. For a few days he hadn't even tried to keep that promise. He lost a little weight, food didn't taste right and there was a constant gnawing in his gut so it was hard to tell when he was hungry.

This morning when Seth woke though, he knew it was time to start putting himself back together the best he could. He was not under the illusion that he'd ever feel normal again, that severed cord would always ache, like an old break. Painting was a great way for Seth to get his emotions out, so he spent the better part of the day in his studio. He did a series of small canvases that included the sunset he and Troy shared from the peak of the mountain, the tree they sat in to take a selfie, and the garden full of various yellow and blue flowers, their favorite colors, they'd planted in Troy's yard.

It felt good to memorialize these things. He even tried to paint from memory the cougar he saw in his backyard, now knowing it had been Troy, but he couldn't quite get it right and gave up around dinner time, wanting to take the girls out to play. Kashmir and Silver seemed to share his burden. They weren't eating as much and sulked about most of the day. He couldn't allow his own emotions to affect his babies any longer.

Standing at his backdoor, Seth took a deep cleansing breath and gave himself a little pep talk. He could do this. He could go out and be loud and playful and, if not happy, at least not sad. They played tug-of-war with a rope that had three ends, played hide-n-seek and ran around acting like their rambunctious and spontaneous selves. Well, for the most part. Seth's heart wasn't quite in it, but Kash and Sil were enjoying their playtime and, in that moment, it was enough for him.

Sometime during a round of pillowcase carousel, Seth became aware of a burning sensation in his chest. He closed his eyes and concentrated on his magical essence like his mom taught him to once she opened up about Leshy abilities. He could practically feel the air and forest around him change, become charged with a dark and primal energy.

His eyes snapped open. Troy. He was there and he was agitated. Seth just hoped it was a case of the nerves and not anger or hatred that pulsed against his

senses. Just in case though, he scooped up Kash and Sil and put them in the house before following the pull of his connection with Troy to the edge of his yard.

Now that Seth's mind was open to his magic and Troy was here, he was certain they were in fact mates. Troy's tendril of energy called out to his, their ends made only for one another and unable to match up with any other person in existence. That connection had never been cut like he thought, it had actually never been forged.

"I know it's you," Seth spoke into the empty forest. "I can feel you. I can *feel* you." He waited, heart beating in his throat for a response. When none came he spoke again, unwilling to give up. "I'm so sorry about the way things happened." He took a single step into the woods. "Please believe me when I say I didn't know."

A chuffing sound drew Seth's attention to his left. He squinted, trying to see through the trees and brush. A flash of gold drew his focus, and he inhaled sharply at the site of the magnificent cougar prowling back and forth in the distance. "Wow," Seth's breath released in a rush. "I can't believe you really are a cougar. You're beautiful."

Chills raced down Seth's spine when the cougar let out a scream that was filled with anger and pain. Unafraid and unwilling to give up, Seth whispered, "I miss you." He guessed Troy's keen hearing would pick up his words and he was right. The cougar twisted his head back and forth and let out another anguishing yowl.

"I understand if you hate me. I can't imagine the pain of losing your family." Seth told Troy when the sound of his torment ended. Still Troy didn't approach him, continuing to keep his distance and slinking back and forth. Seth felt frustrated. "Fuck, Troy, could you please just shift and talk to me? You owe me at least that much."

Troy stopped pacing, looked straight at him and hissed. Seth felt himself starting to get angry at the way Troy was treating him. He needed to make him understand that he wasn't the enemy. "She died of loneliness and heartbreak. Cecelia. Did you know that our kind can do that?" Seth's voice grew louder. "She and your mother were best friends. They loved each other, and I know your mom wouldn't want you to blame my aunt for what happened to her."

Troy's only response was another rumbling hiss but Seth kept going. "Goddamn it, Troy, look past your own bias and fear. You'll see that they

shared a bond that was so deep either would have given their lives for the other.” Seth took another heavy step forward. His throat felt dry and his next words came out raspy, heavy with emotion. “I think you know what I say is true because we share a similar bond don’t we? Only one that goes even deeper than friendship.”

Seth’s words finally seemed to have an effect on Troy. He stopped, turned in Seth’s direction and moved forward, stalking his prey. Seth held his ground and continued. “You’d rather die than live without me, wouldn’t you?” Troy came to a halt mere feet away from Seth now. He crouched low to the ground, waiting. Seth spoke the words he hoped would pull his lover and mate the rest of the way. “I know I’m right because that’s how I feel about you. I love you, Troy.”

Troy pounced, catching Seth by surprise and hitting him square in the chest, knocking him down. The air whooshed out of Seth’s lungs and his back collided with the ground. Two-hundred and fifty pounds of pissed-off cougar landed on his chest, and for the first time while he was in Troy’s presence, Seth felt a small spark of fear. He covered it up by saying, “That’s not quite the response I was hoping for. I imagined you’d be human when you jumped me.”

In one moment Seth lay under a snarling, snapping cougar, and in the next, he felt warm naked skin against his own. Troy had shifted back into his human form. He held Seth down with a hand around his throat. “After my mother, my father, my grandfather and both my brothers died, I vowed to kill any Leshy I came across. I didn’t want your kind destroying any more lives with your mischief.”

“Troy—”

“Shut up.” Troy’s hand tightened around Seth’s throat, but he wasn’t afraid. “But I can’t kill you. God help me, I can’t.” Troy leaned over and kissed Seth’s lips. The pressure on Seth’s throat gentled, and he could feel Troy’s thumb rubbing along the corded flesh. Every ounce of Troy’s heart was poured into that kiss, the dark and rotten parts as well as the light and beautiful ones.

Troy broke away. Seth waited patiently for Troy to gather his thoughts, knowing Troy had more he needed to say. “I’ve been angry and alone for so long.”

Seth couldn’t help himself, he had to touch Troy. Slowly running his hand up Troy’s arm and across his shoulder, he brought his palm to rest against his mate’s cheek. Troy turned into his hand just a fraction, but it let Seth know he yearned for his touch.

“I was so close to going feral.” Troy’s voice was low, and he looked directly at Seth as he spoke. “The curse would have finally finished off the last shifter in my line. And then I smelled your scent on the wind and I thought I was saved because I found my mate, but I was really saved because I found *you*. Your brightness calls to the darkness inside me and gives me balance. I want you as my mate, Seth. Forever.”

“My heart is already yours, Troy. You just need to claim it.”

Troy arched his neck and roared to the sky. He grabbed Seth by the hair, tilting his head back and exposing his neck. The bite was not gentle or orgasmic. It was hard and deep and so very painful, but it was nature’s way and Seth fed off it.

Energy and life flowed between them, making Seth’s every cell come alive. When Troy withdrew his fangs from Seth’s neck and licked the wound to staunch the flow of blood, Seth’s magic surged and his cock hardened against his leg. He never felt anything like the instinct that coursed through his body, urging him to take control, complete the mating and cement their bond for all eternity.

Seth pulled Troy against his body and rolled until he lay on top of him. Cat eyes stared up at him, and Seth knew why he hadn’t gotten them right in his painting. There were flecks of green amongst the gold. He slammed his mouth down against Troy’s. He wasn’t a shifter, but he sure as hell felt like an animal as he bit and licked at Troy’s mouth. He took each of Troy’s wrists in his hands and slammed them to the ground above the man’s head.

“Yes,” Troy hissed, tearing his mouth away from Seth’s. “Claim me. I’ve been waiting forever to feel my mate inside me.”

Seth straddled Troy’s thighs, taking in an eyeful of the man’s cut cock. It reminded Seth of Troy’s animal side, strong and powerful. He rose to his knees and reached to the sky, arching his back and letting his magic flow through him. It felt so right, so ancient and primal, like the very beginning of time, to mate here, out in the open air, upon the dirt and earth that gave everything life.

Seth bent over Troy’s body because he needed to taste him, smell him; needed the unique taste of Troy on his tongue and in his nostrils. He ran his nose across Troy’s collarbone and followed the muscle and sinew along his neck, inhaling deeply. He could smell the crisp freshness of newly formed leaves and the cool chill of the wind. There was something else, too, something that was just Troy.

Needing more, Seth scraped his teeth across the thick muscle that ran from Troy's neck down to his shoulder. At the same time he pushed Troy's arm back up, sliding it along the soft grass until his elbow rested above the messy brown mop of his head. Seth began his exploration at the peak of Troy's nipple. He licked and sucked the round bud briefly before turning his head and diving into the potent core of his mate's scent.

Seth took it all in, his face buried in the soft nest of hair beneath Troy's arm. The dark, musky-scented air flooded his lungs until they burned. Troy moaned beneath him and reached up with his other arm, taking a handful of Seth's hair and using it to hold him against Troy's flesh. Seth licked and sucked the skin and muscle all around Troy's underarm, moved his nose down through the patch of hair again and then bit and laved at the smooth brown skin covering Troy's ribs.

Down and dirty sex was nothing new to Seth, but this was so much more. It was intimate on a level he never before experienced. He wasn't just being driven by his physical desires. It wasn't just about being emotionally in love with Troy, it was instinct and magic, and it was pure. There was nothing they couldn't do with one another's bodies, no boundaries or walls between them.

Seth jumped to his feet and divulged himself of every stitch of clothing, wanting nothing unnatural between them. He sank to his knees then, this time straddling Troy's chest, guided by an innate need to dominate and own every part of Troy.

Words weren't needed between them. Troy knew exactly what Seth intended. He opened his mouth and raised his head off the ground, not even flinching as Seth fed his uncut cock into the wet, willing cavern of Troy's mouth and all the way into his throat. Seth threw his own head back and called out into the air.

He felt the currents shift around them, felt his connection with the earth along his knees and shins. But most of all, he felt that strand deep in his core that signified his mating with Troy. When he accepted the bite, their energies wove together along the pathway. Seth pulled out, felt his foreskin slide against his shaft. He stopped right when Troy's lower lip caught on the flared edge of his cockhead, taking a moment to enjoy the sight of Troy's mouth wrapped around him.

His dick throbbed along with the pulsating rhythm of their life bond. If Seth closed his eyes he could almost see it. The glowing fiber was new, fragile and

not yet complete. He wished Troy was able to see the beauty of their mating like this, but the strands of life all around them was something only his kind could see.

He bet Troy could feel it though, feel how much they needed one another, how perfect they were together. He wanted Troy to feel it all, wanted to finish this between them, forging a bond so unbreakable nothing could touch it. Seth slammed his hips forward, owning Troy's mouth, and watched as Troy's eyes rolled back in his head.

Seth reached out and tugged the hair on the back of Troy's head, encouraging him to lay his head down on the soft grass. He followed him down, never breaking his dick's contact with Troy's lips and tongue. Once they were settled, Seth rose above Troy in a prone position so he could thrust down into him. His ass muscles clenched and released and a glorious burn settled in his lower back.

Troy took everything he gave. He didn't have a choice. This was Seth's claiming, Seth showing his mate his strength and ownership. It was nature's way and it was absolute. Troy's hands suddenly dug into Seth's hips, the passion of their coupling causing the tips of his fingers to shift into claws. Seth felt the sharp sting of penetration and the warm trickle of blood down his side.

"Yes!" Seth growled. This was the way sex was meant to be, out in the open, nothing held back. It was sweat and come, blood and the essence of life. It was raw power and masculine beauty, and it made Seth's balls draw up. He pulled out of Troy's mouth with a roar, saliva dripping from his cock and leaving a trail as he slid down Troy's body to lay between his outstretched legs.

Seth bit the inside of Troy's thigh, stuck his nose deep in Troy's groin and inhaled, the scent of his lover strong here as well. Seth wrapped a hand around Troy's ball sac and tugged hard, claiming ownership of his seed, as he took the head of Troy's cock into his mouth. Troy shot up off the ground with a strangled cry, flopped back down to the ground and arched his back.

Seth would paint this moment in the near future, never wanting to forget the sight of Troy in the throes of passion, bronzed skin glistening against the lush green blades of grass. Seth did that to Troy's body, to his soul. He would never, ever share that painting with another living being. Troy, and every intimacy the man allowed, belonged to Seth.

Seth loved the way Troy thrashed about as he worked the man's cock and balls, but he needed to be in control so he threw a leg over one of Troy's and

hooked an arm around the thick thigh of his other leg, shoving his shoulder tight up against Troy's hamstring to force him to keep his lower body still. Seth devoured Troy's entire length, shoved his tongue in the slit, and dragged his teeth across the sensitive head

Spit and drool dripped from Seth's chin down Troy's length, along the seam of his balls and into the crack of his ass. Seth didn't care. They were free from all of the things that held people back from fulfilling their deepest desires, having no room between them for ridiculous human concerns about mess and bodily fluids.

Feeling Troy's balls pull tight and his shaft pulse, Seth released him from his mouth, running his lips down the thick vein that ran the length of Troy's dick to his balls. Sucking them each into his mouth and rolling them across his tongue, before moving lower.

Seth pulled the heavy sac of Troy's balls up to where they fell on either side of his shaft, exposing his perineum and the ring of his asshole. He drew the tight flesh of Troy's taint into his mouth and sucked on it hard. Troy's thighs flexed like he was trying to gain leverage. Whether to shove himself harder against Seth's mouth or pull away from Seth's assault, he didn't know and didn't care. He would bring pleasure to his mate any way he saw fit.

And right now Seth wanted to feast on the private entrance into Troy's body. He kissed the puckered skin reverently before swirling his tongue around it teasingly and then dipping inside. Troy went limp beneath him and a deep moan filled the air. Seth smiled at that, stiffened his tongue and did everything he could to drag more of those sounds from Troy's throat.

When the sound of Troy's pleasure reached its crescendo, Seth rose to his knees, ready to lock the final piece of their bond into place. Seth urged a panting, shaking Troy onto his side. He pushed against the back of Troy's knee until he bent his leg, and then pushed Troy's top leg up so it pulled his smooth, round ass open.

Seth used the pre-come pouring out of his cock to coat it completely. He straddled Troy's unbent leg, lay against his hip and arm, and wrapped his arms around Troy's back and chest. "You belong to me, Troy," Seth whispered in his ear. "All your dark edges are mine. And I'm yours too. I'll give you all the light in my soul. I love you." And with that, Seth thrust into Troy hard, not giving an ounce of gentleness. He knew the cougar respected him for it, while the man trusted him for it.

With each thrust, Seth could feel their link solidifying. With each grip of Troy's passage, he could see the individual fibers of energy weaving together. He held Troy so tight the man would have bruises as he drove into him over and over, every snap of his hips full force.

The animalistic frenzy of their mating was reaching its peak. Seth needed to come inside Troy's body, fill him with his thick spend. He sought Troy's cock with his hand, gripped the swollen flesh tight and pulled in time with his pounding rhythm. Seth felt the energy and life around him enter his body, like it was being sucked into a vacuum. It built up and up in his every cell, until he thought he was going to explode, before leaving him in a blinding rush as he came inside Troy's body, feeling the warmth of Troy's own come spread over his fingers.

They lay there for a long while afterwards, murmuring intimate words between them and basking in the bright glow of their new mingled energies. The sound of scratching finally reached Seth's ears. He slowly got to his feet, feeling physically drained from the intensity of their joining, and reached down to help Troy up.

They held each other there, standing naked in the middle of Seth's yard, seemingly unable to stop touching and caressing one another. The scratching noise grew louder, and Seth reluctantly stepped back from Troy. They both wore the biggest shit-eating grins and then broke into joyous laughter. "Holy shit," Seth barked. "That was out of this fucking world."

"Yeah," Troy winked, "I'm sure glad I didn't kill you."

"Funny," Seth deadpanned. "For that I'm letting the girls out." Seth walked to his backdoor, turned back to look at Troy and added, "And fair warning, they love to play with round dangling objects. And their teeth are real sharp." He opened the door and Kashmir and Silver darted out. When he turned back towards Troy, a cougar now stood where the man was mere seconds before. He gave the big cat a dirty look. "Cheater."

Seth found his clothes and put them back on. He knew not everything was settled between him and Troy, but what he knew with even more certainty was that they would get through it all and come out stronger for it. The sun may be setting on this day, but they would see many more to come.

Seth settled into his usual spot on the smooth stone, the sun's rays warming his skin. When Troy settled his huge furry body next to him and laid his head in Seth's lap, it warmed his heart as well. Kash and Sil climbed on Troy's back and curled up together, making Troy chuff.

“Oh, stop, you big pussy cat.” Seth scolded Troy. “You’re stuck with us now so you may as well admit you love them.” Troy tilted his head, the equivalent of shrugging his shoulders.

“Well, I know you love me so you’ll just have to put up with them. And I promise I’ll put up with you, that is, so long as you don’t ever wake me again at the ass crack of dawn. Rooster.”

The End

Author Bio

Gina A. Rogers is an amazon living in South Central Pennsylvania where she grew up and will never be allowed to forget she once sported a mullet. She has mild OCD issues with regards to symmetry and reading order and is obsessed with the letter V. She loves nerds and men who wield swords (pun intended), especially while wearing skirts of the tartan or even leather variety. Although she loves reading dark and tragic stories, the ones that play out in her head and find their way to paper are fun, snarky and always end happily ever after!

Kyle Adams started out dabbling with writing gay romance stories for fun. He writes what makes him laugh and hopes anyone who reads his work laughs with him. Kyle had three books nominated in the 2013 Goodreads.com M/M Romance Group Readers' Choice Awards and two books nominated in 2012 for the same event. His free story, Dirty Cop won Best Short Story in 2013.

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