



HIGH COUNTRY

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Loose Id

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About this Title

Genre: LGBT Shape-shifter/Vampire Paranormal Suspense

When he breaks up with his controlling ex, sci fi novelist Bradford Thorne heads for the high country to work on his new novel. Specifically, he finds sanctuary at a horse ranch that breeds pintos.

Ranch owner Sheelinn MacNamara's a puka on the run from Hunters. Shapeshifting Linn can turn into a black stallion or a black wolf, but his secret keeps him from finding love.

Neither of them is anticipating the effect the other has on their libido, or on Bradford's ex, Victor. They're not looking for love, but it's hard to hide from the heart in high country.

Publisher's Note: *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: Anal play/intercourse, male/male sexual practices.*

Chapter One

Snow mantled the sharp peaks of the Rockies, the stark lines and ridges rising into the vivid blue of the sky. The road wended its way between the crags, the rental car rolling along on the pavement as the miles ticked by.

The view was spectacular, and the driver—Bradford Thorne, also known as Bradley Thornton, science fiction author—glanced this way and that as he drove higher and higher into the mountains. He kept watching for the turnoff onto the ranch road, but so far he hadn't spotted it.

He glanced at his watch. *I should be there by now. He said about an hour from Boulder on Highway 36.*

He ran a hand through his unruly mop of brown hair and sighed, anxious to get started on his vacation.

Some vacation. I've left the city, and though I plan to work while I'm here anyway, it will be a nice break from the usual grind. God, the mountains are spectacular, they really are.

He tore his eyes away from the beauty and grinned when he spotted a large white sign beside the dusty road that read:

HIGH COUNTRY RANCH

HORSES OF COLOR

STUD SERVICES

MARES AND FOALS FOR SALE

At the bottom was a phone number he recognized as the one he'd called to rent the cabin where he'd be spending the next month. He slowed the car, put on his blinker, and made the turn with caution when the road turned out to be

unpaved, rather than dust-covered asphalt. Even going slow, the ride down the dirt path was a bumpy one. He glanced at the laptop case on the seat beside him and hoped nothing rattled loose.

The last thing I need is a broken computer in the middle of nowhere.

He slowed more when he came to a rut running crosswise to the road, and the car bounced and rocked as it traversed the shallow ditch and climbed up the other side.

I guess they've been getting a lot of rain.

He loved the rain, and the thought of rain coming down in such beautiful country, the flash of lightning among the mountains, sent a chill of hopeful expectation through him.

This is going to be great! I've got four entire weeks for less than what two weeks cost me the last time I took a vacation. A vacation that had been a huge disappointment. Not only hadn't he gotten much writing done, but he'd also wound up with food poisoning from the buffet on the cruise ship. He'd spent four days of pure misery in the ship's infirmary along with two dozen other passengers.

This is going to be a lot better. I just know it will be.

Best of all, Victor has no idea where I've gone.

Victor Augustine, his former lover. He didn't want to think about Victor. Sure, it had been great...at first. But Victor had turned into a control freak about a month into their relationship, and by their six-month anniversary as lovers, controlling had turned into domineering shading toward abusive.

Do not need the drama.

He had enough stress dealing with his agent, his publisher, and the occasional appearances at conventions. The last thing he needed were problems in his home life.

The car rounded a thick stand of trees, and the ranch came into view. White fences corralled grazing horses, all of them patchworks in black, brown,

gold, and white, with a few spotted horses in the mix. The house itself was large, a ranch style—of course—with a large picture window at the front. Several SUVs and pickup trucks lined the double-wide driveway.

He slowed even more and brought the car to a stop behind a rust-spotted blue pickup truck that was missing its tailgate.

A brown mutt with a shaggy coat ran up to the car, wagging its tail and barking up a storm. Not sure how friendly the dog was, Brad waited in the car for someone to come out of the house.

It didn't take long for someone to appear from around the back of the house. The man was lean and lanky, dressed in dirty, work-faded, and aged jeans and a T-shirt for some sort of horse-related event. Possibly a rodeo, or maybe a race, he couldn't tell because only the horse remained. The cloth was stretched tightly over broad shoulders and a well-defined chest that tapered to flat, ripped abs that were quite visible under the rather tight shirt. The sleeves of the T-shirt were gone, which showed off well-defined triceps and biceps and the deep sort of tan you only got from working outside. A cowboy hat and boots completed the man's attire. He moved with the assurance of someone who knew his place in the world and enjoyed the life he led. A thrum of desire rolled through Bradford as he watched the cowboy approach.

That's one very attractive man, he admitted to himself as the dog—which had been barking his head off since he drove up—left the side of his car and ran to the man. It began to jump up and down, excited, tail wagging so fast, it became a blur. Whether it was because of the cowboy's arrival or the strange car in the yard, Bradford didn't know.

The guy came around to the driver's-side door and leaned down to peer into the window. There were faint lines around his eyes, the sort that came from squinting in the sunlight. The eyes themselves were a light amber color that reminded him of a ring his mother used to wear, or maybe good-quality beer. *I could sure go for a beer and something to eat. I should have stopped at one of those diners I passed. Too late now.*

The cowboy smiled at him, which increased the crinkles at the corners of his eyes.

Make that damn attractive. He found himself staring at the man's smiling mouth, wondering what it would be like to kiss him. *Okay, it hasn't been that long since you broke up with Victor, so it's not as if you haven't been laid recently. Take it easy. Besides, he's probably not even bisexual, much less gay. These rugged cowboy types are usually straight as they come. Too bad, though. I wouldn't mind a literal roll in the hay.*

He reached for the button to roll down the window, but the smiling cowboy opened the door before he got the chance. Brad stepped out of the car.

"Hey, I guess you must be the guy who rented the vacation cabin." The cowboy held out his hand. "I'm Sheelinn MacNamara. Friends usually call me Linn." He motioned to the dog that stood near the car wagging his tail, tongue lolling from his mouth. "This is Dingbat, so named for the way he acts when visitors come by."

"I'm Bradford Thorne. Everyone winds up calling me Brad," he replied, taking the offered hand. The man's grip was firm but not hard enough to hurt. The warmth of the man's skin and his easy smile put Bradford at ease. He didn't think MacNamara had ever met a stranger; everyone was a friend in the making. At least that was the impression Brad got from the way the guy acted.

The rancher held his hand a little longer than necessary, and his amber gaze roamed over Brad from head to toe. *Is he checking me out or...what?* The man's smile widened into a grin. "When you told me you were an author, I expected a pudgy old guy," MacNamara remarked. "Not a guy in his early thirties who looks like he works for a living."

Brad chuckled. "That's what most people expect." He'd learned early on that mental work led to snacking, and he either had to control his eating with fanatic zeal or hit the exercise equipment daily. If he didn't, he got a case of author's gut from too many snacks and not enough physical activity. Working out meant he could have his midafternoon snack. "Believe me, writing is hard

work. Using your mind to such a degree can be very exhausting. Especially when you finally glance at the clock and realize you've been at it for twelve solid hours."

"Well, I suppose any job tends to wear a person out by the end of the workday," Linn remarked. "There's no driveway around to the cabin, so I'll show you the way back there. I'll have some of the hands help you with your suitcases."

Brad shook his head. "No need. I've got them." He opened the trunk and got out his suitcase, retrieved the laptop from the front seat, and turned an expectant look on Linn.

"Okay then, follow me."

Brad followed the rancher around the house, which had hidden a pair of stables, and a few more fenced paddocks, where several more of the patchwork horses grazed peacefully. The smell of manure and animals made a pungent counterpoint to the crisp mountain air. It reminded him of summers spent with his grandparents on their Pennsylvania farm, though they'd had a couple of ponies and cows, not horses. He smiled at the memory.

"The smell's not going to bother you, is it?" the rancher asked. "We had a lady author here a couple years ago, and she was really unhappy. Said it stank so much she couldn't work."

"It's fine. I spent my childhood on a farm."

Linn nodded. "Just making sure before you get settled in and decide you don't like the place." He glanced at the man following him.

I didn't expect him to be so young, much less so damn good-looking. This is going to be a real treat, because, unless I'm mistaken, he's gay. Linn led the other man past the stables and through a stand of trees that acted as a windbreak for the pastures. Beyond the trees in a small clearing stood the cabin. The area around it formed a small, wildflower-decked meadow. Linn had

found that tossing some wildflower seeds around the cabin added to the “charm” of the place and increased the likelihood of it being rented during the summer and early fall.

Most of his renters turned out to be artistic types, authors and a couple of painters. Though he'd had the occasional family rent the place, they usually turned out to be troublesome. He didn't run a dude ranch, but invariably that was what most families expected. Catered meals, horseback rides, and entertainment from sunrise to sunset. Linn's place wasn't set up to handle things like that, so now he avoided renting to families.

This is the first time I've rented to someone I've found attractive, though. He glanced in Brad's direction, noting the way the author walked behind him while his gaze swept the forested area and a faint smile curled his mouth.

What would it be like to kiss him? Would he kiss back, or would he push me away? Would he want more than a kiss?

The thought sent a tingle of desire through Linn, and he quickly shoved the entire line of thought aside. As much fun as it was to speculate on what it would be like to kiss or even fuck the other man, he didn't think such daydreams were productive, all things considered. Much as the idea appealed, he couldn't risk exposing himself to a man he'd just met.

It's too risky. But he will be here a month; maybe once I know him better... He shook his head. *Not even a month is long enough to trust anyone with such a secret. But hell, I could really go for a romp in the hay with a man as good-looking as Bradford Thorne. Consequences be damned.*

But he knew he shouldn't think about it. He liked this place and didn't want to be forced to leave, as he'd had to leave other places because of past indiscretions.

They went up the steps to the porch of the cabin. Linn frowned at the drifted dust and the leaves scattered across the wooden deck. There were cobwebs on the porch furniture, the small table, two chairs, and the swing were all dirty.

"Sorry about the mess," he remarked. "Ethan, my weekend helper, was supposed to come up here Saturday and clean things up. I guess he forgot."

His guest shrugged. "No problem. It will give me something to do this afternoon."

Linn frowned. "You didn't pay all that money to come up here and clean things. I'll send one of the boys over to get this place put to rights." He searched through the keys until he found the right one and inserted it into the lock.

Brad smiled. "Whatever you'd prefer. I don't have my exercise equipment here, so I need to get some sort of workout, even if it's just sweeping a porch."

Linn shoved the door open. The hinges squeaked with a sound as sharp as tormented mice. He frowned. "I'll get Ethan to come up and oil those at least." He turned on the light switch. While it was broad daylight, the cabin tended to stay on the twilight side of lighting because of the stands of trees that surrounded the place.

"Whenever he has time. I'm sure everyone here is pretty busy."

Linn shrugged. "We have our days," he agreed as the author took a look around the main room of the cabin. A couch was placed on the wall opposite to the door and window at the front of the cabin. To the left of the couch was a pair of easy chairs that matched the couch. The love seat to the set was under the window. They were all in Native American-style geometric patterns in deep red and brown with thin bands of cream separating the darker colors. A sturdy coffee table stood in the center. A fireplace took up the remaining wall.

Brad paused in the doorway, taking the room in, a smile lighting his face. "There's no television."

"We can bring one up for you, but the only place to put it is in the master bedroom on the dresser."

The author shook his head. "No, a month with no television is fine by me. I've got a few gigs of MP3s I listen to when I write, and I long ago discovered the TV is a distraction I can do without."

Linn nodded. "Well, if you change your mind, just let me know."

"Thanks."

"There are towels in the cabinets in the bathroom. If you have any laundry that needs done, you can use the washer and dryer at the house," Linn told him. He was repeating things he'd already told the man over the phone. *Okay, stop making small talk. I'm sure he's got work to do, and I sure as hell have things waiting on me.*

"Before you go, where's the nearest restaurant or grocery store? I didn't stop to pick anything up or eat lunch."

Linn fought a grin. *Maybe I have an excuse to hang out a little longer.* "Well, the nearest diner's about twenty miles back the way you came. Closest grocery store is in the same town as the diner, but it's off on a side road. I can give you directions if you want, or I could drive you to town myself. That way you'll know where it is next time." *Okay, what am I thinking? He doesn't need me driving him around, and I really do have work that needs to be done.*

Brad regarded him for a moment, his deep brown eyes full of thoughtful contemplation. "You know, that might not be a bad idea. That car I rented isn't cut out for multiple trips along your driveway."

"It's usually not this bad, but we've been getting some real gully-washer rainstorms the last couple of weeks. As fast as we grade the driveway flat, it rains and makes a new batch of ruts across it. So, do you want me to drive you to town?"

"Sounds like a plan to me, if it's not too much trouble. I'd hate to take you away from your work."

Linn shook his head. "If it was any trouble, I wouldn't have offered. Besides, my work will be waiting for me when I get back."

"Good enough," Brad agreed and set his suitcase down on the floor. The other bag—which looked to Linn like a computer case—he set on the coffee table. "I'll even buy you lunch for your trouble."

"You're right, that does sound like a plan," Linn agreed.

They left the cabin, Linn locking the door and handing the key over to Brad. "If you're worried about using the car, I do my grocery shopping on Sunday afternoon. You're more than welcome to ride along if you like."

"Well, I don't want to impose on you," Brad replied.

"No imposition or I wouldn't have offered."

"I'll keep it in mind."

But damn, this guy isn't going to be easy for me to ignore. Especially if I keep finding reasons to be around him. Going to lunch and taking him to the store is a stupid move. Inviting him along on Sundays is also a tribute to a decided lack of brains. Or willpower. Either way, I'm going to get myself into trouble again.

He glanced at Brad as they crossed the meadow. Sunlight warmed his hair from dull brown to a halo with sparks of gold and red fire. The sound of bees, the sweet scent of the forest, and the pungent odor of animals filled the air and lulled him into a feeling of contentment.

Do not blow it! Do not sacrifice your hard work over fleeting pleasure. It's just not worth it.

But no matter how much he tried to convince himself otherwise, the thought of that lean, hard body under him as he thrust into yielding flesh was something Linn couldn't get out of his thoughts.

Chapter Two

Brad watched the beauty of the mountains pass by the window of the truck. The scenery was spectacular no matter which way he looked. *For that matter, the view inside the truck isn't bad either.* The rancher was easy to look at, and his ready smile and friendly chatter made the trip to town go by much faster than that part of the drive had seemed when Brad was alone.

"Might be a good idea to hit the store first," Linn commented as he turned off the main road onto the street of a small town. Brad hadn't noticed the name of the place because he'd been too busy admiring the view inside the truck when they'd passed the sign.

"Whatever you want to do, but I have to get some refrigerated food so I don't know about leaving it in the truck to get warm in the sun."

"I keep a big cooler in the back. Twenty miles isn't far timewise, but in the middle of summer, who wants lunch meat sitting in the sun for any length of time?"

"Good point. I'll buy a bag of ice with my groceries."

He keeps looking at me as if he's checking me out. Then again, my imagination's in overdrive because I'd do him in a New York minute.

He glanced out the window and then at Linn. His gaze dropped to the noticeable package in Linn's jeans, and he quickly turned his gaze elsewhere.

I've got to lay off the gay-cowboy porn. I mean, seriously, the first cowboy I've met and I'm lusting after him. Brad, you need a life.

They passed the diner and turned down a side street. The grocery store wasn't far along the road, and Brad made a point of keeping track of where it

was in relation to the diner, on the off chance he had to come for food on his own.

Linn pulled the truck into the lot and parked near the store. The lot was almost deserted.

“Not very busy, are they?” Brad remarked as they got out of the truck.

“It's Tuesday afternoon. Most folks around here shop on Friday evening after they get paid.”

“Oh yeah, I guess most people are at work right now.”

Linn nodded. “That's where I'd be on the average Tuesday.”

They entered the store through the automatic doors, and the coolness of air-conditioning felt good to Brad after the warm sun in the confined space of the truck.

He grabbed a cart and walked farther into the store, squinting at the signs above the aisles until his eyes had adjusted to the change in lighting.

“I'm going to let you get on with your shopping. I'm going to pick up a few magazines since we're here. Meet you at the checkout.”

“I'll get done as fast as I can,” Brad told him.

“Take your time; I'm not in a hurry.” The cowboy grinned at him. “Not much of one anyway.”

The man ambled off toward the opposite end of the store as Brad headed for the produce department.

About twenty minutes later, he found Linn standing in the aisle where the books and magazines were, with a handful of glossy magazines in his hands. When he saw Brad, he hurried over, grinning from ear to ear. “I want to show you something,” he said and opened one of the magazines to a page near the middle. There was a picture of a black-and-white horse standing with its head and tail held high and Linn holding the horse's lead rope.

“This is High Roller, my champion stud.”

Brad glanced at the rest of the accompanying information, discovering it to be an advertisement for stud services. "He's a good-looking horse," Brad remarked to be polite. The guy was obviously proud of the animal, and he had every right to be. The stallion was beautiful, though Brad was hardly a keen judge of horses.

Linn patted him on the shoulder, and Brad felt a thrill of desire at the contact. "That he is," the rancher remarked and dropped his voice to add, "He's not the only fine-looking animal around here either."

Brad's tongue froze to the top of his mouth, and he found himself staring into Linn's bright golden gaze. He wanted to say something, unsure if he was reading Linn's words incorrectly from the perspective of his own overactive libido.

"You about done?" Linn asked, his gaze going to the contents of the cart.

"I just need to find some beer and milk. Otherwise, I've got what I came for."

"Come on, I'll show you where they are." Linn led him to the beer first, and Brad grabbed two twelve-packs to make sure he'd have enough—on the off chance Linn might come by one evening.

Wishful thinking. He'll get back to his ranch, and that will be the last you see of him until Sunday's shopping trip. Like he pointed out, he's a busy man.

They went to the dairy section, and Brad grabbed milk and a couple of packages of cheese for sandwiches, and they headed to the checkout.

"You sure you've got everything?"

Brad nodded. "I've got enough to hold me until Sunday. I can restock then."

"Good enough."

They got through the checkout, and Brad grabbed the bag of ice he'd bought as they went out. Linn helped him load his groceries and the ice into

the beat-up cooler in the truck, and then they both climbed in and Linn started up the vehicle.

“Hope you don't mind diner food. Joanna's Diner is probably more on the greasy-spoon side of dining than you're used to,” Linn explained as he drove.

“Don't worry about it. Contrary to what a lot of people seem to think, being from New York City doesn't mean you eat at five-star restaurants every day.” Brad smiled. “To be honest, I try to avoid them. Tiny portions for three times the money I'd pay for a burger isn't my idea of a fun time.”

Linn parked the truck, and Brad followed him inside. They sat in a booth, and Brad glanced around. The place looked like a holdover from the 1950s, with red vinyl seats, red tabletops, and chrome fixtures.

The waitress came, put glasses of water on the table, and set down two menus. “I'll be right back, boys.”

Brad felt something brush his leg, and when he looked under the table, he found Linn's leg against his.

The rancher gave him an innocent smile. “Something wrong?”

Brad met the man's rich amber eyes. “That all depends,” he replied, hoping his voice sounded calm, because he certainly didn't feel calm. Butterflies danced a mad fandango inside his stomach, and a certain piece of flesh south of his belt had twitched right at the verge of going hard.

The rancher raised a dark brown eyebrow. “Depends?”

“On what you had in mind for dessert.”

In answer, Linn grinned. “Well, the peach pie is good.”

Brad's gaze didn't waver. “I wasn't sure if you were thinking about pie”—he bumped the leg under the table with his own shin—“or some cake.”

The guy sure does look like a helping of dessert, some nice solid beefcake I could sink my teeth—or cock—into. Damn, you have got to get your lust for this man under control.

The question of whether Bradford Thorne was gay had already been settled in Linn's mind. While it wasn't blatantly obvious, Linn had enough experience identifying men of the right persuasion to realize almost immediately that the science fiction author was gay. And if any doubts had remained before, his little probing comments and touch of their legs had clinched it for him. Bradford hadn't reacted as if something dirty had rubbed against him; he'd reacted in kind.

This is no good. The guy just got here, and I'm already putting the moves on him. Damn it, why can't I remember the dangers involved when it comes to things like this? I'm thinking with the wrong head again, that's for damn sure.

This is the last time I rent the cabin to a man. I'll stick to those lady romance authors; at least they admire me from a distance and don't touch.

Shit, it didn't even occur to me he might be with someone. He could have a beau back home who wouldn't like it if he has a fling on his vacation. Nah, he's not with anyone or he wouldn't be watching me like a starved dog staring at an unguarded steak.

"Whatever you're thinking about must be pretty serious," the object of his lust remarked, breaking into his reverie.

Linn shook his head. "Not really," he replied, unwilling to share his thoughts.

The waitress arrived. "What can I get you boys?" she asked, smiling at them.

Brad returned her smile. "I'll take a burger, mustard, no mayo, and a half order of fries."

"I'll have the double cheeseburger with bacon, a side of fries, a cola, and a slice of peach pie."

Linn handed the menu to the waitress and noticed Brad staring at him. "Don't worry; I'm paying for my own meal."

Brad shook his head. "No, really, I'll pay. I was just wondering how you were going to eat so much food."

Linn grinned. "Hardworking men need big meals. When we get back, I've got a fence to repair and wood to chop for the coming winter."

Brad appeared pensive. "I don't suppose you have any exercise equipment around here, do you?"

"Fraid not," he replied. "But there's always chopping and stacking wood, if you really want some exercise. If you've never done it, I'd be happy to show you how. I'll even discount your rent or add a day or two, if you get the job done for me."

Brad looked as if he were giving it serious consideration. "That might be a plan. If I sit doing nothing but writing for an entire month... Well, I don't even want to think about the consequences."

Linn offered him a grin. "Well, you go on and think it over. There's lots of time for you to decide."

The waitress returned with their food, and the two of them dug into their meals, putting the conversation on hold while they ate.

Linn kept catching himself gazing at the good-looking author, which was bad enough. Worse was the fact his mind kept imagining what the guy would look like out of his shirt and trousers. Naked, in a bed, or bent over the back of the couch in the cabin.

You'd better put some reins on your damn libido, boy, he admonished himself. The cart's getting ahead of the horse here. I might want him, but that doesn't mean the feeling's mutual.

But the way he kept catching the writer glancing at him led him to believe Brad might just be interested in him too.

They finished their food, which Brad paid for as he'd agreed, and then they climbed into the truck and started the drive back to the ranch.

Brad gave a soft cough when they were about halfway back to Linn's spread.

"You all right?" Linn asked.

"I, um..." Brad coughed again and went on. "I was wondering if you'd like to come to the cabin tonight after you're done working and have a beer?"

"A beer?" Linn inquired. He wondered what else Brad might be offering, or if his own wishful thinking might be reading more into the invitation.

I shouldn't get involved and risk my livelihood over a few nights of passion. I should have my frigging head examined, because no matter what I tell myself, I know I'm going to risk everything like a damn fool. He found himself grinning despite the dangers involved. Or maybe it was because of them.

"Yeah, I thought you could come by and have a beer. I mean, that is, if you want to."

Linn couldn't stop grinning. The guy sounded like a schoolboy, nervous and unsure of himself. Not the kind of reaction you'd expect from someone offering a simple invitation to another person to come by for a beer. It was odd, too, because Brad had seemed perfectly comfortable trading innuendos in the restaurant.

He eyed the other man. "Just a beer?" he asked.

"Ah... I guess we could talk...or something."

Linn's grin widened. "Or something, huh?"

Brad looked downright uncomfortable. He glanced out the window, but Linn could see the slight blush on the man's cheeks.

He's either the shy type, or he's nervous about being the one doing the asking. I wonder how many boyfriends he's had. I'd bet the ranch he's not the one-night stand sort of guy either. Then again, he's just gotten here and he's already exchanging come-ons with me. It sure does make me wonder what's going on in his head. Too bad I don't know.

"Sure, I'll come by around eight, if that's okay with you?"

Brad nodded. "Sounds good." His voice carried an unmistakable tension, and the scent of nervous excitement drifted to Linn in the confines of the truck.

"That's not too late for you, is it?"

"No, it's fine. It will give me time to unpack and do some more preliminary plot work on my book."

"Okay, we'll call it a date, then," Linn said, letting Brad take the words as he would.

Brad didn't say anything, wouldn't even look Linn's way.

Oh yeah, we're definitely going to fuck.

A few minutes later, Linn pulled the pickup into the driveway of his ranch. "I'll help you carry your groceries to the cabin," he said as they got out of the car. Dingbat came running up, doing his usual excited jumping routine.

"I think I can manage to get the groceries to the cabin," Brad told him as the dog bounded around them both.

"Yes, Dingbat, I'm home." He patted the dog, and it took off for the back of the house. Linn shook his head. "Goof dog."

"He seems really high-strung."

Linn shook his head. "He's half-border collie; they're very enthusiastic about everything." He glanced at the bags piled in the back of the pickup. "You sure you don't want help?" he asked, looking for any excuse to keep talking.

"That's okay, really. I can manage. It will just take a couple of trips."

"You sure? It's no problem. Besides, didn't you say you wanted to get to work?" He went to the back of the pickup and reached in for some of the groceries. *And I'm really looking for any excuse to be alone with him longer. Not a good idea with the hands here, but once they leave at five... I'll stay at my place until it's time for that beer.*

"I still have unpacking to do before I can get to work on the book. And anyway, there's that whole author-butt thing. The walk will do me good."

Linn studied the other man. "Suit yourself. I'll get busy with my own chores. See you at eight."

"Right. I'll see you at eight for that beer," Brad repeated as he grabbed a bunch of bags and headed toward the cabin.

Linn watched him go, his eyes taking in Brad's broad shoulders and tight butt as he walked away. He smiled. Eight couldn't come fast enough.

Chapter Three

Brad stretched and glanced at the time at the top corner of his laptop's screen. Seven twenty in the evening. Linn would be coming by in less than an hour.

His cock stirred at the thought, going half hard, surprising him with the intensity of the lust the rancher had awakened in him.

What is wrong with me? I've barely ended my relationship with Victor, and here I am ready to start another one with a man I barely know. He leaned back in the office-style chair at the desk and closed his eyes. Linn's face and his ready smile filled his mind, as did the lean form of the man's body. He mentally cataloged the way Linn filled the shirt he wore, the noticeable bulge at the front of his jeans, and how the other man had looked at him while they'd been together.

He's gay. He's got to be, or why act the way he had? Why the innuendo?

And he's coming here in less than an hour. What will we talk about? Are we actually going to talk or are we going to fuck?

What have I gotten myself into?

More to the point, what's going to get into me?

Shit, I should have bought some condoms just in case. Too late now.

He opened his eyes, saved the file he'd been working on, and shut down the laptop. He had time before Linn arrived, but for some reason he couldn't define, he was as nervous as he'd been when he'd come out to his parents. As excited and scared as he'd been the first time he'd gone home with another

man. The first time he'd had sex as a gay man, and not a man trying to be "normal" who dated and had sex with women.

He wasn't a kid anymore. He'd been with a lot of men—well, not a lot, but a number of them. He'd always been a bit selective in who he slept with, and he'd always used condoms.

Which brought him back to the fact he hadn't brought any with him, or bought any at the store.

Linn has to live in this town, so maybe buying condoms there might not have been a great idea. Still, I won't go bareback, and I don't have any with me, so what does that leave us? Handjobs?

And he might not be coming here to have sex, so stop thinking about it.

He sat and stared at the blank screen of the laptop as if it might provide some answers.

I'm excited and uneasy. But he knew that wasn't exactly true. He had been mentally distancing himself from Victor for weeks in preparation for dumping the older man. He'd really loved Victor, at least in the beginning, but the man had grown too demanding, too controlling for his love to survive the abuse. The verbal criticism had been bad enough, but the day Victor slapped him for saying he needed to finish editing the last chapter of the book he'd been working on for his editor—well, that had been really sobering. But when Victor followed it with the audacious order that he wanted Brad to stop "wasting his time writing," that had been the proverbial last straw. Writing was more than Brad's job. It was the core of his life, and it was the one thing he would permit *no one* to interfere with, not even the man who claimed to love him.

Brad sighed and got up. He was going to have company soon, and he wanted to make sure nothing was lying around that would make a bad impression on his guest. He put the suitcase that still lay open on the bed in the closet and turned at the sound of footsteps on the front porch.

He glanced at his watch. *He's a little early.*

Brad hurried to the door and opened it to find...no one.

He frowned. *That's weird. I'm sure I heard someone on the porch.*

Maybe it was a bird on the roof or something.

No, that's not right. I'm sure the sound came from the porch.

It was still daylight, but there were enough trees and brush near the cabin that someone could be hiding in them and he wouldn't be able to stop them.

He looked around, still frowning, and saw a bit of color lying on one of the chairs. He crossed the porch, hearing the sound of his own steps, wondering what they'd sound like from inside the house.

Brad stared at what lay in the chair.

A single red rose.

A cold chill slid along his spine.

He'd received a lot of single red roses in the last few months.

All of them from Victor.

He scanned the surrounding forest. The rose made him uneasy. He hadn't seen any rosebushes at the house, and more to the point, this wasn't the type of flower that came from a home garden. No, the rose was the same as those that came from a florist's shop. The exact same sort of flower Victor always brought him.

He'd come here to make a solid break with Victor. Was it possible the man had found him? Could Victor be stalking him? He was, essentially, alone in a cabin that stood far enough from the main house that no one would hear him yell for help.

But Victor doesn't know where I am. Even my agent doesn't know. How could Victor have found out I'm here?

Motion in the trees caught his eye, and he turned to see the shaggy mutt, Dingbat, bound out of the trees. The dog romped through the meadow of flowers, snapping at the butterflies as they drifted through the colorful weeds.

He made a lot of noise when I arrived. If Victor were here, wouldn't he be barking his head off?

The dog froze, his muzzle pointed toward the trees. After a moment Dingbat took off, running toward the ranch house as though something had spooked him.

Brad glanced at the rose, picked it up, and tossed it into the tangle of wildflowers beside the house before he turned to go back inside.

A shiver ran through him, and he turned around, wondering at the odd chill that had swept through him. He was sure someone lurked in the trees, watching him. *That's totally stupid. No one's out there, but... That rose came from someone, but who?*

He refused to consider Victor might have followed him from New York all the way to Colorado, much less that he'd left a rose on the porch.

But a nagging hint of doubt, the voice of worry, made him peer at the trees again, trying to spot anyone in the gathering shadows beneath the spreading branches. Unable to see anyone, he reached for the doorknob.

Somewhere out in the woods Dingbat began to bark.

Brad turned, walked to the edge of the porch, and listened to the dog's excited yapping, which ended with a sharp yelp.

"Dingbat?" he called. "Here, Dingbat!"

The dog didn't come, didn't bark. Brad stood there, tempted to go search for the goofy dog but hesitant.

What if Victor did follow me?

Don't be stupid; he doesn't know where you are.

He froze, heart beating wildly in his chest. Someone was coming through the trees. He could hear footsteps as the unknown person came through the fallen leaves and twigs that littered the ground.

Even if it is Victor, why should I be afraid of him? Okay, he did slap me, but I doubt he's a crazed killer.

Then again, how well do I really know him? He never really discussed his family, barely mentioned anything about his past. What if he is some lunatic? He did turn out to be a bastard.

The crunch of footsteps resolved itself into Linn. The lanky rancher appeared from the trees, striding along into the meadow. He had on his cowboy hat and boots, the ubiquitous pair of jeans, and a red gingham shirt.

"Hey, Brad!" he called, turning his megawatt grin on as he came across the field of wildflowers.

"Um...did you see anyone on your way over here?"

Linn shook his head. "Can't say that I did. Why?" The rancher had reached the porch and stood at the bottom, looking up at Brad with a quizzical expression.

"I, um...heard Dingbat barking."

"Probably chasing a deer," Linn remarked. "He does it all the time."

Brad nodded. "Maybe, but..."

Linn stepped onto the porch and gave Brad a concerned look. "What's got you spooked?"

"I..." *What are you going to say, that you think your former boyfriend followed you here from New York, left a rose on the porch, and kicked the dog?* He shook his head. "It's nothing, I guess."

Linn kept the smile on his face, but he sensed something was very wrong, though he couldn't figure out what it might be. There was an odor in the air beneath the crisp cologne Brad wore. An odd scent he recognized from somewhere but couldn't quite place. A musky, dusty smell his mind said it didn't like.

"I'm sorry. I'm not used to the woods, I guess," Brad remarked, his gaze on the trees.

Something's going on here. He's not telling me everything.

"Yeah, some city folks do get creeped out by the trees, especially at night when the wind's blowing." *Mostly the women who stay here alone get spooked. I didn't expect a man to get scared.*

"Let's have those beers," Brad said as he went inside.

"Sure," Linn agreed, taking one final look at the woods. The rays of the setting sun were fading, the sky taking on a deep blue as twilight wrapped the surrounding trees in shadows.

A tingle ran up his spine, an icy chill flowing outward along his nerves.

There is something out there. But what?

Welcoming light spilled from the cabin's open door, and Linn stepped into the room, giving the author a wide smile. "I hope the beer's cold," he remarked as he shut the door firmly behind him, twisting the dead bolt for good measure.

Brad turned to face him, a frown on his face. "Is something wrong?"

Linn shook his head. "No, why?"

"You locked the door."

"It's a habit." He shrugged. "I lock doors behind me because I used to live in the big city too. Seemed like a good habit to keep." He was lying, of course. He normally didn't lock doors behind him. But the sense of something being out there, watching the cabin, had convinced him to be safe rather than sorry.

Wish I'd locked the house up now. I'm so used to no one being around this far out that I've gotten complacent. The scent he'd caught outside lingered in his mind. He searched his memory, trying to place what it might be, and came up as clueless as he'd been when he'd first noticed it over the fragrance of the forest and wildflowers.

"Do you want a glass, or do you drink it right from the bottle?" Brad called from the kitchen.

"From the bottle. Fewer dishes that way."

"A man after my own heart," the author replied.

Linn chuckled. I'm after something, that's for sure, and it's not your heart, though I could do a lot worse, he mused as he parked himself on the love seat under the front window. He didn't know why, but he wanted to be near the door, at least for now.

Brad came out of the kitchen with two open beers, turned on the lamp on one of the end tables, then sat down on the couch across from Linn. Brad held the beer out, offering it to him across the coffee table.

Guess he wants to talk before we get to the fun. Unless I've read him completely wrong and he's really only interested in having some beer and conversation.

Linn accepted the beer and took a swallow, letting the cold brew and the bitter taste of hops wash across his senses and clear them of the uneasy feeling he'd had outside. Whatever he'd sensed—or imagined—wasn't inside; it was out there.

If it even existed.

As if I'm prone to imagining things. There's definitely something out there, but what? I wish I could remember where I know that smell from. I'm sure I'll figure it out...later. Right now I'm supposed to be visiting the man of my afternoon daydreams. And what daydreams he'd had, imagining the author under him writhing in passion. His cock had been hard on and off for most of the afternoon.

"So how's the book coming?"

Brad shrugged, and the fabric of his shirt pulled taut across his broad shoulders. Linn took pleasure in watching the movement. Brad had a good build, one he would happily watch for the sheer joy of it. *Too bad he's only here for a few weeks. I wouldn't mind keeping a stud like him around.*

"That bad?" he prompted when the other man didn't elaborate.

"Not so much bad as not being sure exactly how I want it to end."

"End? I thought you hadn't started it yet."

"I haven't. I was working on the outline, filling in some of the blanks. But the one blank I can't fill is how it's going to end."

Linn smiled. "Well, you've got time to figure it out, right?"

"Yes, but I do like to know where I'm going first." Brad took a few swallows from his beer, and Linn watched that too, admiring the smooth length of Brad's neck, the arch of his clearly defined collarbone, and the planes of his chest.

He finished off his own beer, shocked at how fast he'd downed it, and set the bottle on the table. "So what do you think of Colorado?"

Brad smiled. "It's beautiful."

So are you, Linn thought as he got to his feet. "You want another one?" he asked, picking up his empty bottle.

"Sure. Let me," Brad said as he stood. Brad reached for the empty bottle, his fingers brushing across the back of Linn's hand.

Linn met Brad's deep brown eyes. Dark as bittersweet chocolate, the man's gaze burned with undeniable desire.

"Hell with it," Linn murmured and took the other man into his arms. He set his mouth to Brad's in a kiss full of hunger. A hunger that Brad met with equal passion as his lips parted under Linn's, and not being one to turn down an invitation, Linn slipped his tongue in, exploring the other man's mouth. He tasted of beer, the sweetness of want, of joyful surrender, which filled Linn's senses with a hum like a hive of honeybees unleashed in his mind. The room did a slow tilt and spin, and for a second Linn thought he was going in two directions at once, despite the fact that he was motionless.

Breathless, confused, and dizzy, Linn broke the kiss to gaze at Brad. What the hell was that? he wondered, unsure of what had just occurred. As fast as it had happened, the disorientation vanished. But Linn knew he hadn't imagined it.

"Something wrong?" Brad asked, his eyes as filled with confusion as Linn's own mind had become.

"No, I just..." *What am I going to tell him? That I got dizzy the instant I started to kiss him? I'm sure that will convince him to let me fuck him.*

"Maybe you should sit down. You've gotten a bit pale. Did you get too much sun, maybe, or something?"

Linn shook his head. "No, it's nothing like that," he assured, while wondering what *had* happened. Except for the instant of vertigo, he felt fine. *What the heck happened? I've never felt anything like that before in my entire life.*

Brad urged him down onto the couch, taking a seat beside him. The man's face expressed deep and genuine concern. "You're sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," Linn replied. He found himself watching Brad's lips. He leaned closer to the other man and set his lips to Brad's for another kiss. Brad responded to the kiss with the same eagerness he'd exhibited the first time.

To Linn's relief, the strange dizziness didn't repeat itself. He put his arms around Brad and deepened their kiss, his tongue slipping into Brad's mouth. Their tongues touched, tangled, and Brad moaned softly. Brad's arms went around Linn's neck, and he scooted closer. Linn guided Brad down onto the couch, pressed him into the soft, yielding surface without breaking their kiss.

Trapped in the confines of his jeans, Linn's cock ached with the need to be inside Brad. He wanted to fuck the other man but wasn't sure how receptive Brad would be to the idea. He nudged his knee between Brad's thighs and smiled into their kiss as the man parted his legs. Their cocks pressed together, and the cloth of the author's trousers and the denim of his jeans did little to dull the sensation of hard flesh touching. A flash of need burned a trail of pleasure along Linn's spine to his brain. It erupted from him as a groan and a possessive tightening of his arms around the man under him.

Brad shoved at him, and Linn ended their kiss. "I've got a bed, if you've got a condom," Brad gasped out, breathless, eyes heated with want.

Linn didn't even try to stop the grin that spread across his lips. "I'm a genuine optimist; I brought several condoms," he admitted. "And I don't need a bed."

Beneath him, Brad squirmed. His lips parting in a wide grin to rival Linn's, he said, "Well, cowboy, let's see what you've got under those clothes." Brad reached for the buttons of the Western-style shirt Linn had put on after his shower. He sat back and regarded Brad as, one by one, the author undid each button. Beginning with the one at the shirt's collar and working his way down. All the while Brad's fingertips brushed along his skin in teasing caresses.

He's not shy anymore, that's for damn sure. Guess he made up his mind he wanted me. Good thing too, because I sure as hell want him.

Chapter Four

Brad stared at the cowboy's chest. The solid muscles were those of a man who worked hard to earn his living, rather than the sort you got in the gym. Linn was solid and lean, and Brad pressed his lips to the cowboy's chest right above his heart.

He smelled of sunshine and soap, the faint traces of some sort of fabric softener on his clothes. Brad finished unbuttoning the gingham-print shirt and pulled it open to reveal the flat, rippled abs of a man who did heavy lifting on a daily basis. His mouth went dry, his tongue darting out to lick his equally dry lips.

Linn caressed his hair, ran the rough pad of his work-callused thumb over his cheek. "You're one of the sexiest men I've ever met."

Brad couldn't help it; he chuckled at the compliment. "You must not get out much," he quipped as he shoved the shirt off Linn's shoulders to expose even more of the man's corded muscles.

Linn laughed in response to his remark. "You're right. I don't get away from the ranch very often, but I still know prime beef when I see it."

"Prime beef?" Brad met Linn's amber gaze. "Would that be steak or ground beef?"

Linn's grin lit his eyes, turning them a smoky color that caught the lamplight and actually glowed, and he reached between Brad's thighs as he replied, "The finest tube steak."

Chuckling again, Brad shook his head. "You sure know how to make a guy feel special."

"I try," Linn said as he teased the flesh under his hand.

Brad stared at the man's eyes, captivated by the way they reflected the light, entranced by the rich color. "Like real amber," he remarked.

"What?" Linn asked with a puzzled look. The hand on Brad's crotch stilled, and he found he wanted the hand to move or, better yet, move inside his pants where he could feel skin on flesh.

Brad smiled. "Your eyes. They're like real amber, at least the way they catch the light reminds me of good-quality amber."

Linn studied him in silence for a moment. "Does it bother you?"

Brad shook his head. "No. They're unusual. Should it bother me?"

"Guess not," Linn replied and gave him another one of those big grins. "Now, what were we doing before we got distracted?"

Brad reached up, cupped the back of Linn's neck with his hand, and pulled the man's head closer. "I think we were here," he said and set his lips to Linn's mouth.

The rancher returned the kiss, and his tongue brushed over Brad's lips, seeking entry, penetrating Brad's mouth when his lips parted. Brad darted his tongue into Linn's mouth, tasting the beer they'd both been drinking and something else. Something slightly sweet, spicy that he couldn't identify. He pulled Linn's shirt down off his shoulders to free his arms. He tugged the shirt off and tossed it aside as their tongues danced. Brad's cock ached, wanting free of his pants and underwear.

Linn ended their kiss. They were both breathing hard, and Brad reached for the buckle of Linn's belt. He opened it, fingers moving to the button and zipper of Linn's jeans.

"Good point," Linn remarked in reaction and left the couch to toe off his boots and remove his jeans. Beneath them he had on a pair of black briefs that barely constrained the hard flesh pushing at them.

Brad stared at the bulge in the man's underwear. Anticipation dried his mouth and caused his heart to race, and his own erection throbbed with the need for the man's hand, the man's mouth, for a rock-hard rod of hot flesh to fill him.

"I want you," he managed to groan the words out through the passion choking him.

Linn stripped off his underwear, and Brad stared. The cowboy was well hung, with large round balls and a big, veined cock Brad decided he needed *now*.

He pulled off his own shirt, kicked off his sneakers, and yanked his pants and underwear off before flinging them aside. "Condom?"

Linn's soul-warming chuckle filled the room. "Once you've made up your mind, you don't waste any time, do you?"

Brad shook his head. "No."

Linn picked up his jeans and pulled out a strip of condoms. He tore one packet off and dropped the rest on the coffee table.

Brad stared at it. There were three more. "You certainly are optimistic."

Linn grinned. "I like to be prepared."

"Good thing," Brad said as Linn stepped closer. The cowboy's gaze moved over him, as if the man were trying to burn the image of Brad sitting there on the couch of his cabin into his memories. Brad stood, put his arms around Linn's neck, and stepped into the circle of his welcome, their cocks brushing. The feel of Linn's hardness against his own pulled a moan from Brad's parted lips, a moan that was muffled as Linn's mouth closed over his.

Brad shivered at the feel of Linn's muscular body pressed to him. The hard rod of the Linn's cock trapped between their bodies felt hot, as if the man could brand Brad with his flesh. Linn's tongue, the claming passion of his kiss, the feel of his body, drove the earlier worry about the rose from Brad's mind.

Erased the vague uneasiness that had lingered at the back of his mind in a wash of pure lust stronger than he'd ever felt for Victor.

Linn kissed him breathless. When he broke the kiss, he tore the condom from the package and rolled it over his erection. The scent of latex and lube and the hot musk of masculine desire filled the air.

"Where do you want to do this?" Linn questioned.

In answer, Brad walked behind the couch, braced his hands on the back, and spread his legs. A smile curled his lips as he bent over the sturdy piece of furniture.

"I like how you think," Linn remarked as he joined Brad on that side of the couch. His hands came to rest on Brad's shoulders and moved downward in a caress that flowed over his shoulders, down his arms, feeling the muscles. Linn's hands moved from his arms to his flanks, slid upward along his ribs, and then downward along his spine to stop at his hips.

"You're very nicely built," Linn murmured, his lips brushing along the nape of Brad's neck. Goose bumps rose along his arms as Linn kissed his way upward. Linn's lips and the tip of his damp tongue brushed across Brad's left ear. "And I want to fuck you. Is that what you want?"

"Yes, it's what I want," Brad replied. Hard flesh nudged his anus. The lube coating the condom was cold, and it made him shiver. More goose bumps tingled to life on his skin. The head of Linn's erection pressed to his entrance, and Brad relaxed, ready to feel that hardness inside him. He wanted this, wanted it badly enough not to care about foreplay or what tomorrow might bring.

It was now, this moment, that mattered. Something to reaffirm his independence. To confirm he had a life beyond his domineering former lover.

The hard rod of Linn's dick pressed to his butt, and he exhaled, relaxed as the tight ring parted under the pressure of the cock as it entered him, filled

him. Brad groaned and pushed his hips backward, trying to get the wonderful hardness deeper.

"Well, you're eager, aren't you?"

"Yes, I want to be fucked," he admitted.

"Good, because I plan to fuck you," Linn told him.

The cock withdrew, then slid home abruptly, drawing a gasp from Brad as that stiff dick found the spot inside him that sent a burst of pleasure through him. He groaned, his eyes closing as Linn drove his erection in and out of him, the man's balls slapping against his butt.

"Harder, please," Brad gasped out.

"Hmm...sounds like someone's in a hurry," Linn murmured. He braced his left hand against Brad's shoulder to steady himself and reached around with his right hand to grip Brad's cock and stroke it in counterpoint to the rhythm.

A groan vibrated through Brad's body, and Linn grinned when he saw Brad clutching the back of the couch tightly.

It did feel good, being balls deep inside the author. In fact, it felt more than good; it was wonderful. *How long has it been since I had another man? Hell, I can't even remember.*

And he sure wasn't going to forget fucking Brad Thorne anytime soon. Not when the author was so responsive to his touch and the thrust of his cock inside him.

A memory like this could last him a good long time.

Brad cried out at every thrust of Linn's dick into his sheathing flesh, telling Linn how close the writer was to spilling.

Linn changed tempo, his cock driving into flesh, balls smacking into the author's ass. The rough breathing of his partner told him Brad was going to come, and he sped up his thrusts, wanting to be there with the other man.

"Going to...come," Brad told him.

“Go...ahead,” Linn said, his body teetering on the brink of release. A few more thrusts would take him over into bliss, but he wasn't quite there yet.

Linn pulled on the flesh in his hand, and Brad's cock swelled as he cried out in the grip of orgasm. Linn thrust hard, groaned his own release, and closed his eyes as the powerful blaze of intense pleasure blanked out his awareness of everything. A tingle flowed through his body and spread from the base of his spine throughout every molecule of his flesh. Linn closed his eyes and clutched Brad, held tight to the man to keep himself grounded, part of the world in which Brad lived and breathed.

Brad sighed. “That felt good.”

Linn could only manage a wordless murmur in acknowledgment, the sound guttural, raw with the primal emotions that intruded within his mind. He pulled away from Brad and staggered into the kitchen to dispose of the used condom. He tossed it into the trash, then returned to the living room. Fighting the wild urges that struggled inside him, he dropped onto the couch.

A hand touched his shoulder. “Are you all right?”

He nodded, still not able to speak. *Mistake. A big mistake. Shouldn't have come here, shouldn't have done this. What do I tell him if he sees something different? I've got to get out of here.*

He reached for his clothes, stared at the black nails on his hands, and grabbed his clothing to hide the change. *Go away, damn it. Just go away.*

“Linn, is something wrong?”

He opened his mouth to answer, then shook his head instead.

Brad stepped into his view, his deep brown eyes filled with concern. “You don't look all right,” the author remarked. “You've gone really pale.”

“Just...tired.” He got the lie out, but it was a struggle. His tongue felt thick, too flexible, and his teeth were the wrong shape. He'd gotten much too close. He had to get out of there.

Linn yanked on his clothes, trying to get dressed and not let Brad see his hands. It wasn't easy.

In fact, the effort failed.

Brad stood there, staring at him, eyes wide and confused. "Linn, what's happening?"

Linn shook his head, refused to answer. What could he say? *Oh, by the way, I forgot to tell you I'm not what I seem to be; I'm really not even human!* would not go over well. It never had the few times he'd admitted it to lovers in the past.

The distant past.

Brad grabbed his hand and stared at the thickened black nails. The fingers that had gotten stubbier and wider. He let go, and still staring at Linn, he backed away from him.

There was fear. Linn expected it. He also expected hate. Or rage. But he got neither of those things. Instead, there was a flash of pure disbelief, followed by curiosity.

"Linn?"

"I can't..." he replied, unwilling to tell Brad what he was out of fear for his own existence. He'd told others, long ago, and lived to regret the decision—barely.

"At least tell me this then: Are you going to kill me?"

Linn's head snapped up, and he met Brad's gaze. "No! I'm...not a killer."

He could see the power of the fear that filled Brad, his eyes wide, face pallid in the lamplight. "I wanted you. Needed...this. But...I made a mistake, forgot how difficult control is to keep with someone I want as much as I wanted you."

"Tell me, what are you?"

Linn shook his head. "Can't do that. Sorry, but I can't."

Brad's lips tightened into a frown. "You wanted me, but you can't be honest with me?"

"Don't know you well enough for that sort of trust; nothing personal, but... That's all I'll say."

The author pointed at his hands. "I'm having trouble believing what I saw, but I know I saw something."

Linn shook his head. "There's a shred of truth to every legend, every old myth you've ever heard. More than that, I won't say."

The author regarded him in silence for a moment, and then he nodded. "Okay, I know what I saw, and I'll assume what you said is true about old legends. But I don't understand what you are."

"And I can't tell you. I've already made a mistake coming here and having sex with you."

"A mistake, huh?"

The sour expression on Brad's face told Linn he'd made an even worse mistake with his words.

"I don't mean it like that. It's just, well..." Linn sighed. "Like I said, I wanted you. I still do, but I can't hide my nature, and showing you even a hint about what I am is dangerous for both of us."

Brad dropped onto the love seat near the window. "Dangerous?"

"There are people who make it their business to get rid of anything that's not a "pure" human being. Most of them are nuts, holdovers from the medieval ideals and superstitions that anything inexplicable is dangerous and needs to die."

"All right, but how does that make it dangerous to me?" Brad asked him.

Linn sighed. "You can't slip up and blurt out what I am if you don't know."

Brad sat there, eyes fixed on Linn as he put on his socks and boots. "Isn't the fact I know you aren't human an issue?"

"It is, but"—Linn gave the other man a wry smile—"most people will ignore you or think you've lost a few marbles if you blurt out something about me. Not being able to name what I am is a sort of protection."

Brad rested his elbows on his knees and put his face in his hands. "I just know when I wake up in the morning, this entire conversation is going to strike me as the product of an overly active imagination or a tired mind."

Linn headed for the door. He paused beside Brad, who looked up at him. "It's better that way. Forget you saw anything strange." He glanced at the darkness beyond the window, felt something brush at his otherworldly awareness. It had been a long time since he'd used any of his abilities. He'd hidden for a long time, and that meant he'd suppressed every aspect of what he was, what he'd been long ago.

"Tell me one thing," Brad asked.

"If I can."

"Do you kill people?"

Linn's jaw worked as he thought over how to answer the question. "When they forced me to make a choice between their life or mine, yes, I killed."

Brad nodded. "Are you coming back tomorrow night?"

Linn met Brad's gaze. "Do you want me to?"

Brad gave him a faint hint of a smile. "We only used one of those condoms."

Linn returned the smile. "I'll come back, if you're sure it's what you want."

"I'm sure."

Linn regarded the author for a moment. The fear was gone, but the curiosity remained. If anything, it had intensified.

"See you tomorrow around eight, then."

Linn opened the door and went out, closing it behind him.

His gaze swept the trees; some vague sense of unease filled him. A trail of ice-footed ants romped along his spine. Danger whispered on the wind. He lifted his head and breathed deep, taking in the scent of the forest as he sought the tang of danger on the wind.

Epona, protector of horses, keep me safe. Please don't let it be the hunters. I don't want to run, not again. I've worked too hard to build a new life. Please don't let anyone—or anything—take it from me.

Chapter Five

Brad had anticipated sharing a beer, some small talk, and sex, but the evening had turned out to be nothing short of disturbing.

First there'd been the rose. Then the mystery of Dingbat's odd behavior—though admittedly, he wasn't familiar with the dog—compounded the situation.

Last of all was Linn.

Had he *really* seen the man's nails black and thickened? Had they actually held the strange discussion about it?

One part of him knew it had happened, while the other, the scared-animal section of his mind, didn't want to think about any of it. Not the rose. Not the dog's sudden silence. And certainly he did not want to think about Linn.

He also couldn't stop thinking about the rancher or remembering the feel of Linn's big cock driving into his ass.

Maybe I'm jet-lagged from the time change. But there's no denying tonight was a collection of weird I won't forget anytime soon. Unfortunately.

Brad made his way into the bathroom and showered. He was tired, but his mind was too awake to make an effort to sleep, so he did what he always did when he was restless: he turned on his laptop. After the nut-ball evening he'd had, there was no way he'd be able to sleep for quite some time.

The laptop hadn't finished starting up when Brad heard a knock at the cabin door. He got up, wondering why Linn had come back. *Maybe he wants to apologize for screwing me and running off the way he did. Or maybe he's changed his mind, and he's going to tell me that weirdness with his fingernails was some kind of joke. A magician's trick and nothing more.*

He headed down the hall past the kitchen and entered the living room. He flipped on the porch light and unlocked and opened the door to find the porch empty, with no sign of Linn or anyone else. Brad frowned, peered into the darkness beyond the glow of the porch light. He could just see a shape, a shadow amid the blackness of the trees.

“Hey, Linn, it's all right. I'm awake.”

Brad noticed two small points of red light where the shadow stood.

“Linn?”

The shape fled into the trees rather than come toward the cabin and the glow of the porch light. Brad blinked and rubbed his eyes, unsure if he'd really seen anything out there or not. His eyes *were* tired.

I've got to be seeing things. There's nothing out there but a bunch of trees and my overactive imagination and a case of tired eyes.

He turned to go inside, but a bright splotch of color on one of the porch chairs caught his attention and drew his gaze. Red. He stepped closer to the chair to see what it was. His body went cold with the touch of fear's icy hand.

Lying on the seat of the chair where he'd first seen it was the red rose.

Brad crossed the last steps to the chair and picked up the rose. He frowned. The rose he'd tossed into the tangle of wildflowers should have been wilted. Dying. But the rose in his hand was fresh, as if it had recently been taken out of a florist's refrigerated case.

He hurled it into the darkness, heard it fall into the flowers as he stalked into the cabin. He locked the door and stood in the living room, angry, confused, and scared.

It cannot be Victor. He doesn't know where I am.

Brad returned to his laptop and tried to work, to focus on anything other than the strange events of the last few hours, but it didn't work, or rather he didn't accomplish anything and gave up, deciding to read his e-mails instead.

There were three from Victor. He deleted them unread and waded through three days' worth of e-mails from various authors' and readers' groups, glanced at the couple of social networks he belonged to, and shut the laptop down.

He headed for bed with his eyes burning after using the drops he had for them, and then crawled into bed to listen to some of the classical music he'd loaded into his MP3 player. It helped, and he relaxed enough to fall asleep right around two in the morning.

* * * * *

Sunlight warmed his face, and Brad opened his eyes to the bright light of day streaming in from between the curtains. The sound of birds filtered to him through the closed windows. He yawned and sat up.

By the light of day, the worries and fears of the night seemed silly, the imaginings of someone overly tired from a long trip across several time zones. He got up, had some breakfast and coffee while reading one of his social groups and a few blog posts, and cleared up the couple of dishes. Brad refilled his coffee and then went to work on the outline for his book, tweaking parts he'd already written and improving a couple of chapters after a subplot presented itself.

When lunchtime rolled around, he threw together a sandwich, grabbed another round of coffee, and went back to work. While he'd made very little progress the day before, today the words flowed, and he soon had the outline finished.

He stretched and decided he needed a break to stretch his legs and let his mind unwind. He shut down the laptop and headed out for a walk with the hope that it would further dispel the strangeness of yesterday evening. The odd events were already taking on a fuzzy quality as though they'd happened in a dream.

He stepped into the afternoon sunshine and inhaled the crisp mountain air, which carried the scent of pine from the surrounding woods and the earthy

odor of horses. *I think I'll take Linn up on that offer of chopping some firewood. I need the exercise and some time out of the cabin.* Brad headed for the stairs and came to an abrupt stop. The steps were covered with wilted red rose petals.

So much for an end to the freaky crap, he thought. As he kicked the petals off the steps, his shoes crushed a lot of them, staining the wood.

And how in hell could Victor be here? He can't, that's how. But where are these damn roses coming from? I doubt Linn would be dropping roses on my porch. And if it's not him, then who? It just makes no sense.

And that brought him around to the admission something really *was* going on. Something weird and unsettling, and he didn't know what to do about it. He crossed the wildflower meadow and headed toward the ranch house through the trees.

Maybe I should tell Linn about the roses, let him know someone's leaving them on the porch. He has a right to know someone's running around on his property.

Hell, if it is Victor, and he saw Linn in the cabin with me... Oh shit, we fucked right in front of the window, and we didn't close the curtains. What if Victor saw us? We could both be in danger.

Brad paused on the narrow path from the cabin to the ranch. He could hear the faint sounds of horses and voices, which seemed odd because he was so far from the house, but no sound of Dingbat reached him.

He started along the trail, listening for the dog or any other sounds.

He frowned. There weren't any birds singing or calling out among the trees, and he realized he hadn't heard any since he'd entered the trees.

Is it me that's made them go quiet, or is it something else?

Brad picked up the pace until he moved along at a brisk jog, his feet crunching through the dry leaves and twigs that littered the ground. He left the stand of trees, spotted the ranch house and white-fenced paddocks full of

horses with a sense of relief, though just why he felt that way even he couldn't have said.

The horses nearest to the trees were staring at the woods, their heads up, ears swiveled forward as far as they would go. At first Brad thought they were watching him, but when he moved out of their direct line of sight, their heads didn't turn, nor did their ears.

They were intent on something, but it sure as hell wasn't him.

Okay, maybe there is something out there. Even the horses are alert for whatever it might be, so it's not my imagination.

Then again my imagination couldn't leave roses or rose petals on the cabin's porch either.

There were a couple of men working by the stables, which *might* explain the voices he'd heard. Maybe being able to hear them talking so far away had something to do with the forest and the crisp mountain air. He didn't know, and compared to the roses on the porch, suddenly being able to hear distant sounds really wasn't important. He headed toward them, glad for the presence of other people.

"Hi," he called when he got closer.

The men waved, and Brad joined them. They were typical cowboy types in jeans, T-shirts, and boots, with years of sun exposure weathering their faces. A couple of average guys doing the work they knew.

"Hey there, you're the author guy, right?" the darker of the two asked, tipping his hat back to regard Brad.

"Yes, that's me. Name's Bradford Thorne, but Brad's fine."

The man nodded. "Name's Joe Kendal, this here is Roy Carson," he said, indicating the other guy. "If you're looking for Mr. MacNamara, he had to run to town."

"Actually, yes, I wanted to talk to him about a deal he had for me."

The other man, Roy, had dishwater blond hair and pale blue eyes. He smiled. "He told us about it in case you came up to the house and asked. I can show you where the woodpile is."

"Is he going to be gone long?" Brad wanted to know.

"No clue. He had to run Dingbat to the vet."

A chill filled Brad. "Is he okay?"

The dark-haired man shrugged. "Fool dog tangled with something nasty in the woods. Maybe a coyote or a big fox. He's torn up, but he should pull through."

Brad recalled hearing the dog's yelp yesterday evening. What he hadn't heard was the sound of a dog fighting with something. There'd been the yelp and nothing more.

"Well, that's good," he said. "He seems like a good dog."

"He's a pest," Kendal replied with an easy smile. "But what can you expect of a dog named Dingbat?"

"Aww, come on, Joe, he's not that bad. And he keeps the rats out of the feed," Roy said.

"Yeah, he is a good ratter," Joe allowed. "Roy can show you what needs doing with the firewood."

"Come on," Roy stated, giving a wave of his hand to encourage Brad to follow, which he did.

"Have you been working here long?"

Roy grinned. "About as long as you've been writing."

The reply startled Brad. "You know who I am?"

"Sure, I've been reading sci-fi since I was a kid. Your first story appeared in a small-press zine back in ninety-two; the fall issue, as I recall."

Brad couldn't help himself; he grinned. "It was the third and last issue of *Explosive Decompression*. Very few people read it. I think they had a circulation of about two hundred copies, strictly a mail-order magazine."

"That's right," Roy agreed. "I've got it stored away in a special bag. I hear the zine's worth fifty dollars now. I only paid three and a quarter for it."

Brad chuckled. "I've still got my three contributor's copies."

"It's a shame they went out of business. That was a good publication," Roy commented as they rounded the stables and came to a huge, disorganized mess of tree pieces about two feet long, some of them big enough to almost serve as a coffee table.

"We had a big oak come down last summer, and we're working on turning it into firewood, among other projects."

Brad looked at the bigger pieces. "The coffee table in the cabin?"

Roy smiled and gave him an affirmative nod. "You've got a good eye for detail. We took the biggest section and sawed off a hunk to make the coffee table last fall."

"It's a nice table."

"Okay, let me show you what to do, and then I've got to get back to work. Boss says you work as long as you feel like it, and don't push yourself. You might be in shape, but chopping wood when you aren't used to it can put a strain on your shoulders and back. It don't do many favors to your hands either, so watch out for blisters."

Brad nodded his understanding.

Roy proved good to his word, showing Brad how to chop wood without hurting himself. Once Brad was sure of himself he said, "I think I've got the hang of it now."

"Good. It was nice meeting you," Roy remarked. He paused, gaze on Brad as if he wanted to ask something but hadn't worked up the nerve.

Brad smiled. "Bring it by, and I'll sign it," he said, knowing exactly what the sci-fi-reading cowboy wanted.

Roy's smile could have lit up the sky on a dark night. "Thanks, Mr. Thornton."

"Thanks for buying my books," Brad replied. "Without readers, I'd be working in a restaurant or hanging drywall for a living."

"See you tomorrow," Roy said and headed off with a friendly wave of his hand.

* * * * *

Linn shut the truck off and pulled the key from the ignition. He'd left Dingbat at the vet's office because the dog had lost a lot of blood and they wanted to keep him on an IV overnight, which was fine by Linn.

He got out of the truck, mind going over the events of the morning. Dingbat hadn't come home the previous night, his late-night snack still in the bowl when Linn had woken up that morning. He'd gone out searching for the dog and found him lying in the woods, covered in blood, with several deep wounds in his side. At first he'd thought Dingbat had tangled with a coyote or maybe an abandoned or runaway dog, but the wounds weren't bite marks. According to the vet, they were the marks of claws. The vet had surmised that Dingbat had tangled with a small bear, but Linn knew it hadn't been a bear. The same musky odor he'd noticed outside the cabin last night clung to the dog's fur.

It's time to find out what's out there in the woods and deal with it. Whatever it is.

Linn headed for the trees between his house and the cabin. He got past the last fenced paddock and was about to go into the woods.

"Linn, wait up!"

He turned at the voice. "What is it?" he asked as Brad ran up to join him.

The man was flecked with bits of wood chips and tree bark, and sweat dampened the T-shirt he had on.

The other man's scent reached him, and the sharp fragrance of a man who'd been working twisted around through his mind and sent a pulse of desire through him. His heartbeat sped up, his cock stiffening inside the tight confines of his jeans.

"Is the dog okay?" Brad asked him.

"He'll live," Linn stated, his gaze wandering over the author. He looked as good as he smelled. Damp with perspiration, his dark hair curled slightly at the ends, and his eyes, dark and expressive, were bright with good health, though the man's expression was troubled.

Linn frowned. "What is it, what's wrong?"

Brad's gaze wasn't on Linn. It remained focused on the trees. "I don't know for sure, but...I think my former lover might have followed me here," the author said, his voice barely above a whisper, as if he thought they might be overheard by the man in question.

Linn's frown deepened. "What makes you think that?" he asked.

"He used to bring me red roses, and I found two of them on the porch of the cabin last night. One before you arrived and one after you left. And this morning I found rose petals scattered over the porch steps."

And whatever is out there arrived the same day Bradford Thorne did. Wonderful. I find a man I want, and he's just broken up with his boyfriend, who followed him here.

"Jealous type, is he?"

Brad bobbed his head in agreement. "He got too possessive and emotionally abusive. Wanted me to stop writing and spend all my time paying attention to him. Really self-centered, but none of that started until we'd been together for a while."

Linn nodded his understanding. "Some guys don't know how to act like adults," he commented. "So you think he followed you out here?"

"I don't know how. I didn't tell anyone where I was going, but that's the only thing I can think of to explain the roses. Unless...you left them."

Linn gave Brad a tight smile. "Not my style. I'd bring steaks and beer, not leave a rose."

Brad sighed. "I didn't think it was you. So the only explanation is that Victor followed me here, somehow. That's the part I can't figure out."

"Do you think he's dangerous?" Linn questioned.

"He slapped me once, but"—Brad shrugged—"I don't know. He might be. We were lovers, but to be perfectly honest, I didn't know much about his life prior to when I met him."

Linn tipped his hat back on his head. "I'll walk you to the cabin. I think for the sake of your safety, just in case, you should stay at the house with me. At least until we sort out what's going on."

"If I've brought trouble here, then I should probably pack up and leave," Brad stated.

To Linn, the man looked none too happy, and he couldn't blame him. He'd paid a good chunk of change for the cabin. Add the airfare to Denver and the car rental, and that came up to a serious amount of money.

But I don't want him to go. Which is really selfish, because I want him to stay here so I can fuck him. What does that say about me? But that's not exactly true either. I can protect him from this jerk, but do I want to risk it? What if I lose control and they both see me as I really am?

He should tell Brad to leave. This Victor guy was the author's problem, not his. And yet he couldn't bring himself to turn his back on Brad.

I wonder if he's the one who hurt Dingbat. Which makes no sense, because whatever hurt Dingbat had claws as nasty as those of a bear.

The musky, dust scent meant something. A memory nibbled at his mind, but he couldn't quite get a solid mental grasp on it.

The smell. The claws. A possessive man who left roses for his former boyfriend.

It added up to something. Something dangerous.

And Linn couldn't get a grasp on the entire meaning. What he did know was that whoever—or whatever—this Victor might be, he wasn't human.

"I'll tell you what, you go on back to the cabin and get cleaned up. I'm going to go look around in the woods and see what I can find."

Brad gripped his arm. "You shouldn't go alone."

Linn gave him a wry smile. "Don't worry about me. I can take care of myself."

Brad let him go. "Okay, I'll go to the cabin and decide what I'm going to do. I should probably go home."

"It's up to you. I won't ask you to leave." *And if this thing roaming the woods is this Victor guy, he'll follow Brad home; then what? He might hurt Brad, or even kill him. I can't let that happen. I've got to protect him. I've got to.*

But what am I protecting him from?

They entered the woods together, Linn walking Brad within sight of the cabin.

"Be careful."

"Lock the door," Linn told him and headed into the trees to try and find the person—the *thing*—that had attacked Dingbat and kept menacing Brad.

Linn ghosted through the trees, gaze roving over the ground, searching the branches of the trees for anything unusual. He found a dead squirrel lying on the ground. The small animal was torn almost in half. Linn could smell the strange musky scent on the squirrel, and he frowned.

This is a bite mark. Now what would bite a squirrel like this but not eat it? Not a wolf or fox. A big cat wouldn't bother with a squirrel. And an animal wouldn't leave roses on the porch of the cabin.

So what does that leave?

An answer to his own question began to formulate in Linn's mind, and it was an answer he didn't like. *If I'm right about this Victor jerk, my concerns over Brad getting entangled in the world of the supernatural may be moot.*

Linn moved deeper into the forest, finding traces that something else had been wandering through the trees. Daylight was running out, and if he didn't find a clue to tell him exactly what he was dealing with, he'd have to head home and wait until daylight tomorrow. Or he'd have to risk doing something he was trying to avoid. Something he'd sworn he would never do again.

He headed up a steep slope and paused at the top. The strong scent of death reached him. Linn followed the smell to the remains of a small deer. He crouched down to determine how the young doe had died before he backed away from the animal's body.

The injuries to Dingbat, the remains of the squirrel and deer, and the scent combined to give him the answer he needed. And it wasn't an answer he liked.

He stood up and scanned the deepening shadows.

I've got to get back to Brad before Victor decides he's tired of whatever game he's playing and moves in to carry out whatever horrible end he has planned for Brad.

Linn ran, heading for the cabin and the unsuspecting and defenseless author.

I have to find an excuse to stay with him until Victor, or whatever this thing is, comes for him.

What if it doesn't come for him tonight? What if it waits until I'm not around?

I've got to force it out of hiding so I can get rid of it. If I don't, Brad will be in danger for the rest of his life.

Or until it decides to finally kill him.

Chapter Six

Brad had found rose petals scattered across the porch again when he arrived at the cabin. He'd also discovered a vase of long-stemmed roses on the small table on the porch. He'd swept the petals off the porch and dumped the roses out over the porch rail. The vase he'd left outside, not wanting it in the cabin. He'd really wanted to toss it with the flowers, but he didn't want to risk scattering broken glass through the wildflowers, where anyone, including Dingbat, could step on it and get cut.

He'd taken his shower, put on some clean clothes, and tried to work without success. He kept going to the front of the cabin, looking for Linn, worried about the rancher.

It's got to be Victor, but I can't figure out how he knew where I was going, much less how he could have gotten here so fast.

Of everything that had happened since he had arrived, the thing that bothered him the most was the roses. He could pretend what happened last night with Linn—not the sex but the weirdness—had been the figment of a tired mind. He could even ignore the strange conversation about legendary creatures that he'd had with Linn after they'd had sex, though it wasn't as if Linn had really said very much.

But the roses couldn't be dismissed as the product of too many hours without sleep. They were physical, a real item, not the manifestation of seeing something that really wasn't there.

He turned and spotted the three condoms Linn had left on the coffee table.

I really wanted him to fuck me. And if he comes back tonight and acts like he's interested, I'll do it again. I don't care if he is kind of weird. People think I'm weird because I write.

Then again, I don't think I'm some sort of strange creature.

Of course, my fingernails don't turn black after I have sex either.

He went out to the kitchen and grabbed a couple of beers. He was thinking of going outside when he heard footsteps come up the steps and onto the porch.

Brad hurried to the door, getting there, the two beers still in his hand, when whoever was out there knocked.

Instead of opening the door, he glanced out the front window and saw Linn standing there. He couldn't help it; Brad smiled and unlocked the door. The rancher was out of breath, sweating slightly from exertion.

"Hi, are you okay?"

"It was getting dark and I didn't have a flashlight with me, so I ran. Can I come in?"

"Sure, come in, have a beer, and cool off." Brad stepped aside to let the rancher into the cabin. Linn took one of the beers from Brad as he entered. "Did you find anything?"

Linn sank down onto the love seat and twisted the cap off the bottle of beer and took a couple of swallows. Brad sat down on the couch and watched the cowboy, waiting for Linn to answer his question.

"I didn't find whatever it was that hurt Dingbat, but I did find some signs of something out there. I don't know if it's Victor, or something else."

"Something?" Brad asked, not liking the ambiguity of Linn's reply.

"Let me ask you something," Linn said, then waited for Brad to nod for him to go ahead and ask. "How well do you know Victor?"

Brad frowned. "He never really talked about himself. I know his last name is Augustine, and he works as a freelance forensic accountant."

Linn stared. "A what?"

"Forensic accountant. They're the people who try to recreate where missing money went in cases of corporate embezzlement."

For a moment Linn sat there, gaze unfocused, obviously thinking something over. "What else do you know?"

Brad shrugged. "He was never much for small talk, but we did go to off-Broadway plays, and we went twice to see the New York Philharmonic."

"So plays and music. What about restaurants and movies?"

"Yes, he took me to dinner a few times. Always French, which isn't really my favorite. But we never went to see any movies. He said he didn't care for them that much."

Linn gave a series of slow nods as Brad spoke.

"What aren't you telling me?"

"I'm curious, that's all. You mentioned him, and I thought it was strange he didn't talk about himself."

"What do I know about you?" Brad countered.

Linn met his gaze squarely. "You know I raise colored horses, which I'm very proud of, and that I rent this cabin to people wanting peace and quiet for a while." Linn put his empty beer down on the coffee table.

"You own a dog named Dingbat and have two men working for you named Roy and Joe."

"You also know I'm not what I appear to be."

"Or you're delusional."

Linn grinned at him. "Or that."

"What's your point?"

"My point is you seem to know as much about me after two days as you know about Victor, who you dated for... How long did you date him?"

"Six months." Brad stared at the cowboy. "I never realized it, but you're right. I hardly know anything about Victor."

"Don't you think that's a little strange?"

"Yes, but until recently I never questioned the lack of information." Brad drank his beer and picked up Linn's bottle. "You want another one?"

"Sure."

Brad got up and went to the kitchen to put the empties in the trash and get them another pair of cold ones. He shut the fridge and turned to find Linn standing in the kitchen doorway. The rancher was stripped down to his jeans, the hard rod of his cock visible under the denim. He held up a condom packet. "Which would you rather have, a long cold one, or a long hot one?"

Brad's mouth went dry, gaze locked on Linn's crotch. He wanted the length of hard flesh inside him. And he wanted it *now*.

Linn came into the kitchen and took him by the upper arms. The cowboy walked him backward, pinned him to the counter, and set his lips to Brad's in a series of light, teasing kisses. Brad put his arms around Linn, the beers clutched in his hand clinking softly.

"Don't drop those. We might want them later," Linn murmured against his lips.

Brad fumbled the beers onto the counter and opened his mouth to allow Linn's tongue inside. He could taste beer and something sweet under it. Spicy. He reached between them and pressed his hand to Linn's groin, heard the man moan with need.

He wants me. I want him. I don't care if he thinks he's a Sasquatch or a skinwalker; I've got to have him again. At least if I have to leave, my trip won't have been a total loss. I'll have firmly put Victor in my past, and I might be able to date again. Fall in love with someone who won't treat me like another accessory to their wardrobe, like a tie or an expensive watch.

Linn's hands moved from Brad's biceps to his back, then slid down to his butt and gripped it. Linn's fingers dug in, kneading flesh and making Brad want the feel of a hard cock—Linn's cock—inside him.

"I want you, Brad," Linn murmured as his kisses moved from Brad's mouth to the side of his neck. Teeth nipped him, a lover's bite, and he shivered at the sensation. A memory tried to surface, something to do with Victor, but he didn't care enough about anything to do with Victor to examine it. Not when he had someone as hot and exciting as Linn ready to fuck him.

"Then you'd better get me out of these clothes, don't you think?"

"Ummhumm," Linn agreed as he yanked Brad's T-shirt off, then went back to nibbling his throat.

I want him. I shouldn't be doing this, but it might draw Victor out. He might come for Brad and then I can nail the bastard. Brad won't ever have to worry about Victor using or abusing him ever again. Though why he's become my problem I don't know. I shouldn't interfere, and yet I can't let something like Victor turn Brad into a victim. Not when I wanted Brad from the moment I set my eyes on him.

He kissed his way lower while his hands worked the button and then the zipper of Brad's pants. They dropped around Brad's ankles, and Linn grinned into the man's shoulder. Brad didn't have on any underwear. *He was hoping I'd come back to use the rest of the condoms I left last night. And I'm planning on it. I want to stay with him, and when I leave, I'm going just far enough to make Victor think Brad is vulnerable.*

Linn pulled the other man close, their cocks pressed together. "Ever had sex in a kitchen before?"

Brad laughed, the sound pleasant. A tingle of pleasure went through Linn, something warm, like sunshine on bare skin or the heat of a cozy fire, filled him. Not once in his entire life had he ever felt something like that, and it made

him curious. He wanted to know what the sensation was, what had caused it. *Should something as simple as a man's laugh make me feel that way?*

"Once, actually. Why do you ask?"

Linn lowered his head the fraction needed to whisper into Brad's ear, "Because I plan to fuck you right here and now. Any objections?"

He felt the man shiver in his embrace, goose bumps rising on his skin.

"No, not a single one."

Linn chuckled at Brad's reply and said, "Good, because I wasn't going to let you stop me."

"Ooooh, so dominating," Brad teased. "Are all cowboys so demanding?"

"Yep," Linn said as he exhaled gently along Brad's neck, kissing his way along the lightly stubbled skin. He nipped the flesh he was kissing and smiled at the quiet moan Brad gave. The author pushed him away with a suddenness that left Linn confused.

"What is it?" he asked, taking a step back, unsure what he'd done and concerned he'd somehow upset the other man. They'd been fine together, and then this. It didn't make sense.

Brad stood there, staring at him, his pupils wide, face too pale. "That's how it started with Victor. Little dominance games. I refuse to have a repeat of that kind of relationship."

Linn studied Brad, nodded. *Got to get rid of Victor; that's for sure.* "I'm not like that," Linn explained, reaching out to touch Brad's cheek. The man didn't recoil, which was a promising sign as far as Linn was concerned. But he also didn't move in closer or turn his head into the caress. He allowed it but didn't exactly welcome it.

He put his arms around Brad, held him close. "I don't know what that asshole did to you, but I'm not him."

"I—" Brad sighed and relaxed within the circle of his arms. "I was fine with this, even with your joke, until I remembered this was how it started with Victor. Little teasing games I thought were harmless. I know better now."

Linn held Brad tighter. "We don't really know one another, but I swear to you I'm not going to do anything to hurt you. Not physically or emotionally."

He didn't understand why he felt a need to protect Brad from the *thing* that stalked him. It wasn't any of his business. Not really. Mortals had been falling prey to such things for countless centuries.

And yet... He wasn't about to let Brad come to any harm. Not in his chosen territory.

"Sorry," Brad murmured. "I guess things got so bad with Victor, he became a factor in my life I'm having trouble forgetting."

"It's okay," Linn replied, waiting for any sign from Brad about whether he'd be leaving or if they'd have sex. "I take it the breakup was recent, if he's stalking you."

"Less than a week ago. Victor's the reason I had to get out of New York City. I wanted to get away so I could forget him."

Linn held the author tighter, offering what comfort he could without revealing anything else about himself. He wasn't ready for Brad—or anyone—to know his secret. But he also didn't plan to let the *thing* in the forest harm the author either.

A hand slid along Linn's side to his thigh, grasped the waistband of his jeans, and undid the button and zipper. His jeans were shoved down around his hips, freeing his aching dick. Brad's hand gripped the hard rod of his erection and stroked it gently.

"I guess I owe you a little apology for being a wet blanket and ruining the mood," Brad remarked. He sank to his knees, and his mouth opened to engulf Linn's cock.

The sensation of hot, wet flesh around the sensitive flesh pulled a pleased sound from Linn. He rested his hand on Brad's hair, stroked his fingers through the softness.

A skilled tongue moved over the head of his cock, swept across the head, and took the length of his flesh deep. The tip of Brad's tongue darted into the slit in the head of his cock, and Linn gasped. Brad's skill at sucking dick was indisputable, and as far as Linn was concerned, he'd never experienced anything quite this intense. Linn groaned, the feeling so good, so powerful, he didn't want Brad to stop. But he had to make the other man stop or he'd come. He wanted to be inside Brad when he surrendered to the need of his body.

And Linn *needed* the man on his knees at his feet, down on his knees. But the *why* of such deep need eluded him.

He put a gentle hand on Brad's shoulder. "Stop," he murmured, voice tight with desire. His lover didn't relinquish the flesh in his mouth. Instead he sucked faster, and Linn groaned, the pleasure an enticement he almost couldn't resist. "Stop, Brad. I want to fuck you."

Brad released Linn's cock with one final languid tonguing along the rigid shaft, which made his legs shake from the exquisite power of ecstasy that surged through him.

Brad, still on his knees, looked up at Linn with desire-warmed dark eyes. A faint blush of arousal brightened his cheeks, and lust tinged the air with the scent of desire.

"I want you, Linn."

Linn held out his hand and Brad took it. He hauled the author to his feet and headed for the bedroom, Brad stepping out of his pants as he did. "I want to take my time with you, so we're heading for your bed, if you don't mind."

Brad smiled. "That sounds good to me."

Linn returned the author's smile with one of his own. "Good, because I've picked up the rest of those condoms I brought last night and put them in my pocket."

Chapter Seven

"You keep telling me you're going to use them, but so far that's all it's been, talk," Brad teased as he followed Linn into the bedroom.

"I'll see if I can't rectify that situation," the rancher remarked.

The instant they were inside the bedroom, Linn pulled him into his embrace and kissed him, his tongue brushing gently across his lips, seeking entry without making a demand for it.

Brad's lips parted to allow the cowboy's tongue inside. He moved his own tongue to wrestle with Linn's, returning passion for passion, desire for desire. He reached between them to touch his lover's silken-skinned erection, urging Linn on.

He's nothing like Victor. In my entire life I've never had anyone do what Victor tried to do to me, so the chances it will happen again are probably zero. I'm only going to be here for a month anyway, so how much of a relationship can we have? We can be fuck buddies while I'm here, and then it's over. I'll go home with some good memories of a sexy cowboy and some hot loving. No harm done, and I'll have made a complete break from Victor.

The touch of Linn's lips on his throat and the murmured, "What are you thinking about?" snapped Brad out of his reverie.

"Victor," he replied.

"Am I boring you so much?" Linn asked. He sounded upset, almost hurt, which made Brad feel like a jerk. He had a hot cowboy lusting after him, and he was thinking of his grade-A bastard of a former boyfriend.

"No, you're not. Victor left me rattled. And finding those roses on the porch..."

Linn stood back, took Brad's head between his hands, and met his gaze solidly. Brad found himself forced to stare into Linn's eyes. The amber irises caught the dim light, reflecting it like the eyes of a cat... Or a wolf, his mind whispered. The thought instantly followed by, don't be silly. His eyes are unusual, but they're not the eyes of an animal. But he remembered the odd change in Linn the first time they'd had sex, and it left him wondering who—or more to the point, what—he was about to let fuck him for the second time.

"Don't you worry about Victor stalking you. If I see him around, I'll handle him. People in ranch country don't like trespassers, and I'm no exception on that score. I find him snooping around, I'll send him packing, and that's a promise."

Stalking me? Oh my God, that's what he's doing, isn't it? He's turned from abusive lover to full-out creepy stalker. But how in hell did he find me?

"Okay, Linn," he agreed, managing a wan smile.

Linn kissed him, his hands keeping Brad's head still for the passionate exploration of his mouth. Brad was breathless from the kiss. His heart pounded with the rhythm of desire. His cock throbbed, balls aching for release as Linn fucked him.

"Please, Linn, I need you," he told his lover.

"Good, 'cause you're going to definitely get what you want," Linn told him. The cowboy lay him down on the bed, his weight pressing Brad to the mattress. Linn kissed him, and his work-roughened hands moved over Brad's body, rasping gently against his skin.

Brad groaned as his desire to be fucked intensified with each touch of Linn's lips, every caress on his body. "I want you to fuck me."

The cowboy chuckled. "Well, I guess I should do something about that."

"Yes, I guess you should," Brad replied as Linn got off him and stripped out of his jeans. The rancher's cock jutted outward from his body, and Brad licked his lips at the sight of the hardened flesh. He enjoyed sucking cock, and Linn had an especially fine one, which not only looked good but tasted good too. He scooted to the edge of the bed and grasped Linn's hips, lowering his head to engulf the hard flesh in his mouth. The head of Linn's cock hit the back of his throat, and he applied his tongue to the thick vein on the bottom, tasting the salty, faintly sweet flavor of Linn's precum. Everything about Linn was enjoyable.

The nagging voice at the back of his mind whispered, That's how it was with Victor...at first.

"That feels so good, but I thought you wanted me to fuck you," Linn said.

Brad relinquished the tasty meat in his mouth to reply. "I do, but I also like to suck cock, so I was getting a taste before you put on that condom."

Linn grinned. "Well, if you'd rather suck dick, I'm all for it."

Brad shook his head. "We'll save that for another night. I want to feel you inside me."

"That's okay by me too," Linn replied and reached for the condom packet.

Brad twisted to keep it out of the rancher's grasp. He crawled onto the middle of the bed, presenting his butt for Linn's view as he did so. "You come on over here and get it."

"Sounds like a nice plan you've got forming in your head. Want to let me in on it?" Linn asked as he joined Brad on the bed.

"It's simple, really. I lure you closer and give you the condom. You put it on, and we let nature have its way with us, gaily forward of course."

Linn chuckled. "Of course."

Brad offered him the condom, and Linn tore the packet corner open with his teeth before removing it. Brad watched as the cowboy unrolled the condom

over his stiff prick. He had to lick his lips because they'd gone dry. "Have I mentioned what an incredible cock you've got?"

Linn grinned. "Not until now, you haven't."

"Should have mentioned it before. My bad," Brad remarked.

Linn reached for him, pulling Brad upright to set a hot, wanting kiss on Brad's mouth. The cowboy's tongue invaded his mouth, conquered the last whispering doubts in his mind, driving away his fears and worries about Victor. Telling him without words he need not fear the other man. That no matter what, for reasons Brad couldn't discern, Linn would protect him.

They knelt on the bed, kissing, and Linn's work-roughened hands caressed down his back, over his butt, gripping the firm muscle of his ass and kneading it. Brad groaned. The feeling of having his butt massaged by a lover was good, an enticement that made him want the man even more.

He broke the kiss, gasped out, "Please."

Linn lowered his head to kiss and nibble the side of his neck. Another wave of lust washed through Brad, hot and needy. He pulled away from Linn, unable to take more of the man's teasing. He got to his knees and turned, offering his willing butt to Linn.

Brad glanced over his shoulder when he felt a hand come to rest on his ass. Linn knelt behind him, appreciative gaze roving over him before Linn's hands gripped his thighs and urged him to spread his legs a little wider, which he did.

"Better?"

Linn nodded and positioned his cock at the entrance of Brad's body. The cowboy pushed in slow and easy, letting Brad adjust to the intrusion. Brad groaned as the hard cock brushed against his prostate and sent a jolt of intense pleasure across his nerves.

"You're easy to please," Linn remarked as his cock eased out of Brad to the head before it plunged into him, accompanied by the slap of Linn's balls against the base of Brad's nut sac.

"Put a big cock into me hilt deep, and I'm a happy camper."

"Give me a fine ass to put my cock in, and *I'm* a happy camper," Linn said.

"Seems we're made for one another, then," Brad remarked as he rocked with the impaling flesh moving inside him. Linn was going slow, and Brad guessed the rancher wanted to make it last. But Brad didn't. He wanted to come and then go at it again after they both recovered.

Hands gripped his hips and forced Brad to stop moving.

"Why the hurry?" Linn questioned.

"We've got two more condoms."

Laughing, Linn picked up the pace, driving into Brad with a trip-hammer beat that quickly had Brad gasping as his hands fisted in the bedcovers. "Yes, Linn. Hard and fast. Ride 'em, cowboy!"

Linn's laughter rumbled through the room. "Save a horse, ride an author. That's a new one on me." The rancher's callused hand wrapped around Brad's cock, stroking it fast and rough.

Brad shuddered, and his balls tightened as his body tensed at the verge of climax. He panted, "I bet," before the ability to speak deserted him as an orgasm blanked out his vision in a flash of white-lightning bliss.

Linn groaned as his cock spurted into Brad's tight ass, while the author's cock spilled semen across his hand.

Beneath him, Brad sagged to the mattress with a sigh of contentment. "God, that was fantastic, Linn."

Linn patted his lover's butt, his mind only partially on his lover.

Something lurked outside the cabin. An inimical presence he hadn't been aware of until that moment. But he could sense it now. Malevolence exuded

from the *thing*, which moved beyond the walls of the cabin. He could feel how much it wanted in, how much it wanted to maim and kill, its desire thwarted by the restrictions constraining its kind.

Linn bared his teeth in a smile of grim amusement.

I know what you are, and so long as Brad is in here, he's safe, which is how I intend to keep him: safe from you.

Linn rested his full weight on Brad. He liked the way the author felt under him, and for a fleeting moment, he wondered what it might be like to be the one on the bottom. The idea passed rapidly. Losing control that much was something he really couldn't afford. He glanced at his blackened fingernails, glad his lover lay facedown, unable to see them. He opened his mouth to speak, felt the thickness of his tongue, and gave up instantly. They didn't need a repeat of last night between them.

Not this soon. Not when I have to keep him safe from that damn creature stalking him. He wiggled his fingers, bit down on his tongue lightly to try and reverse the changes in his body quickly, before Brad noticed.

"I could use a beer or something cold to drink," Brad remarked.

Linn grunted a wordless reply and climbed off the bed. He removed the condom, tied it closed, and tossed it in the bathroom trash can on the way to the kitchen. He could get Brad's drink, which got him out of view and gave him time to restore his seeming: the magic that made him appear human. He needed to look normal again as fast as he could.

I'm going to have to tell him what I am, or stop coming back here for sex. I can't have it both ways. I guess I have to stop seeing him as soon as the situation with Victor is taken care of. But I don't want to stop. And I can't tell him because it's too dangerous for him to know. He'll go back to New York City with the knowledge I'm not human. It's too risky for both of us. Damn! What a fucking mess I've myself gotten into. I don't want to tell him, and I don't want to stop having sex with him, but if I keep fucking him I'm going to eventually slip and let the beast out of the bag.

Then what?

But I know the answer. I don't want him to leave. I want him to stay and be my lover, which is stupid because Brad has his own life. I can't expect him to dump that for great sex. Yes, it's becoming more than that to me, but I can't expect him to feel that way about me. Humans aren't as passion-driven as supernaturals are. There's a strong attraction that goes beyond a willing hole and pleasure that I can't deny. I want him to be mine, I want to be his, and it's wrong for me to even think of bringing him into my world. It's too dangerous for a mere human.

How in fuck did I get myself into this?

Damn!

He reached the kitchen and caught a glimpse of the *thing* in the window. Pallid white face, a fall of thick hair darkened by the night to blackness; then it was gone.

So that's Victor. He's handsome, for a thing. No wonder Brad fell for him. Poor guy, he didn't really have a choice in the matter. That's how those things work. They pick their victims and latch onto them like a disease-carrying tick, but instead of taking antibiotics for a fever, the victim winds up dead.

He grabbed two cold beers from the fridge, noticing his fingernails were almost normal. A quick glance at his reflection in the window told him his face appeared perfectly normal. Two pluses. He popped the tops on the beers, tossed the caps in the trash, and headed to the bedroom.

I think I'm going to hang out here with Brad until it gets really late, and then I'm going to go hunting for that bastard, Victor. It's time he stops dogging Brad's tracks.

Brad was right where he'd left him, facedown, naked on the bed. It was fortunate Brad hadn't seen the pair of glowing eyes watching him through the closed window.

A soft snore came from Brad, the author asleep in the relaxed aftermath of being fucked. That was fine by Linn. What wasn't fine was the *thing* watching Brad through the window.

He set the bottles of beer down on the table, went around the bed, and staring right into the *thing's* eyes, he shut the curtains in an act of defiance that evoked a snarl and hiss from the *thing* on the other side of the glass.

Linn's lips curled into a humorless smile. *Go on, be pissed. It means you'll stick around trying to get revenge on me, and that suits me fine. I want you focusing your wrath on me rather than Brad.*

Brad murmured something, and Linn turned around to find the man's dark eyes open, a sleepy smile on his face as he reached for one of the beers.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," Brad replied, then took a long pull from the bottle. He pushed the pillows against the headboard and patted the bed beside him. "Join me?"

Linn didn't need to be asked twice. He sat down and scooted his back against the headboard. He picked up the remaining bottle of beer and took a few swallows of the icy-cold brew.

"Why'd you close the curtains?"

Linn glanced at Brad. "Might not be such a good idea to keep fucking where we could be seen if you're worried about a jealous former boyfriend slinking around out there."

"Good point," Brad replied, an unhappy frown tugging at his mouth. "Do you think he saw us?"

Linn wasn't sure they'd been seen, so he shrugged. "I'm not sure, but there's no sense in getting him riled up more than he is already."

Brad laughed softly. "Riled up. I really am in cowboy country."

"Yep, partner, and don't you forget it," Linn replied, adopting the typical western-movie drawl.

He finished off his beer and watched with a raised eyebrow as Brad crawled to the end of the bed and, ass in the air, leaned over the side for something. Brad came up with his jeans, which brought a smile to Linn's face.

"Well, pardner," Brad began as he returned to his spot on the bed beside Linn, "We've got two more condoms in here, and I'm planning to see they get used."

Linn couldn't help himself. He grinned and then laughed at the eagerness Brad was showing for his cock. "You act you haven't had a dick in you in a long time."

Brad snorted, dropped the jeans, and picked his beer up. "I've had dick, but under terms that left me less than satisfied."

Linn's eyebrow crept toward his hairline a second time. "Oh?"

"Victor was only concerned with Victor's pleasure. My needs were a very distant second."

Yep, they're selfish; that's for damn sure. Out loud, he said, "Well, you'll be here a month. I'll make sure it's a month you won't forget." *And why did I say that? I shouldn't have made a promise like that.*

"And I intend for you to keep your word." Brad put his beer down and reached for Linn. "Now come here." Brad's arms encircled him, pulled him close. The man was warm; the scent of sex, beer, and man reached Linn and coiled through his senses. His cock hardened, eager and willing to be sunk inside Brad's firm behind.

"Man's gettin' uppity. Next thing, he'll be hanging his spurs on my bed," Linn teased and turned into the embrace. He and eased Brad to the bed, his mouth locked to his lover's in a kiss full of lusty promises. Promises he intended to keep.

Chapter Eight

Brad responded to the kiss. His tongue met Linn's in a lover's war, and their tongues tangled, touched, and entwined as the passion grew between them. Brad pulled the jeans closer and stuck a hand in the pocket to retrieve a condom. He got it out, fumbled with the package, unable to look at it because he didn't want to stop kissing Linn. His heart danced to the primal beat of lust as he tore the pack open, found the hot flesh of Linn's erection, and rolled the condom out over it with hands that shook with eagerness.

I can't get enough of him. He's becoming like an addiction, and his cock is my drug of choice, and I don't understand it. I've been with lots of men and never had this reaction. Not even with Victor.

What I already feel for Linn makes me wonder about the depth of my feelings for Victor. I thought I loved him, now I'm not so sure. It's as if Linn is the sun and he wiped a darkness from my thoughts I wasn't aware of. The darkness of Victor. I can't stop thinking about Linn or wanting him. It goes beyond sex, and the pleasure we share, I want to be with him when we're apart. When we're together I can't get enough of him, not just his cock, but his laughter, the sound of his voice, everything about him.

Linn ended their kiss, pushed Brad gently onto his side, guided one leg upward, and patted his bottom. "This time we're going for a slow fuck. That is, if you don't mind."

"Mind? No, I don't mind. Actually, it sounds like a wonderful idea."

Brad almost jumped out of his skin at a thump on the roof of the house. "What was that?" he asked as he swung his legs toward the edge of the bed. He intended to go and look, but Linn's arm around his waist stopped him.

"Probably a dead branch falling on the roof. It happens from time to time. I can check in the morning."

That makes sense, but why do I have my doubts about it being a branch from one of the trees? Would Victor get on the roof? And how could he without a ladder? Don't be silly. You're going to have sex for the second time tonight with a hot rancher.

A rancher who isn't exactly human, the little snitch of a voice in that dark recess of his thoughts reminded.

But by now the truth of the matter was Brad no longer cared *what* Linn might be. The man's arms around him, the feel of his kisses, the hard cock he used to such advantage, made his one worry moot as far as he was concerned. Even with Victor lurking somewhere out there in the night, Brad felt safe in a way he'd never experienced with anyone else. Certainly not with Victor.

He can be a werewolf for all I care, so long as he doesn't pull a gay version of Red Riding Hood on me and try to devour me. Though if he intends to devour my cock to get me off at some point, I'll gladly accept it. That's one kind of eating I can live with.

He followed Linn's guidance, moving to accommodate the rancher, responding to gentle touches on his hips to angle his pelvis and raise his leg higher.

The solid bar of Linn's cock slid home, and Brad sighed with the pleasant sensation of being filled and stretched by the rancher's cock. Linn started to move, slow, gentle thrusts that gave pleasure as well as relaxing Brad. Linn's lips brushed across the nape of his neck, the kiss sending a thrill through Brad. Goose bumps rose on his flesh, and he shivered.

"Cold?" Linn asked.

"No. But kissing me there has a tendency to give me goose bumps."

"Ah. Good or bad?"

Brad laughed. "Good. All good," he replied.

Linn's lips brushed along the nape of his neck in another kiss as the rancher wrapped his arms around Brad. Brad closed his eyes and let Linn set the pace, easing the tension of the last few weeks drain away while Linn fucked him and kissed him.

The feel of Linn's hardness inside him seemed to get better each time, either because he was less and less nervous with each encounter, or because he was getting over the whole mess with Victor. Or maybe it was because Linn made a stark comparison with his consideration in making sure he came too, something Victor had never been concerned with in the least, especially in those final weeks. How many times had he been forced to take care of his own needs during the last month or so he and Victor had been together? Six? Eight? Ten? He hadn't bothered to count.

He reached down and ran his hands over the strong arms wrapped around him, closing his eyes and relishing the feel of Linn's cock as it moved in and out of his body, slow and steady. One of those arms moved from around his waist and changed position so Linn could wrap his hand around Brad's cock. He relaxed and allowed his mind to go blank, to leave only his awareness of what they were doing, what Linn was doing to him, to fill his mind.

Slow and steady, like the beat of a heart, Linn kept up the rhythm until Brad couldn't take it anymore. "Please, Linn, I need more now."

And with those simple words, the gentle pace quickened. Brad moved with Linn, the two of them writhing in a sinuous dance, and though they were lying on their sides, their bodies matched the tempo. The cock inside Brad stroked his prostate with increasing vigor. Brad groaned as his balls tightened, and the white-fire heat of pleasure burned through him from the point where their bodies were united in passion.

He was getting close to release when Linn pulled out. "This time I want to see you when you come," the rancher told him and rolled Brad onto his back. Linn kissed him, then lifted Brad's legs so that his knees were over Linn's shoulders. Face-to-face now, Brad could look into the man's amber gaze.

"Aren't you afraid I'll see what you are?"

Linn shook his head and turned off the bedside lamp.

Brad's mouth was captured in a passion-driven kiss as Linn's cock sank into him in one swift thrust. Brad groaned into Linn's kiss as the rancher resumed fucking him, driving his hard cock deep into Brad's needy flesh.

Brad reached up, ran his hands over Linn's well-muscled body to caress his lover's damp skin. Linn ended their kiss. A long, low groan came from the cowboy, and the pace of his dick in Brad changed into a frenetic beat that drove Brad toward release. A strong hand closed on Brad's cock to add to the pressure inside him, the building need for release. Brad gave a wordless cry as hot fluid spilled from his pulsing cock.

Linn collapsed on him and lay there. Both of them were gasping for breath, hot and sweaty from what they'd done. Brad let himself get lost in the languid daze that followed good sex. And it had been good sex. Very good.

Linn's weight shifted, and the man rolled off Brad to pad out of the room, jeans dangling from his hand.

Brad watched him go. *I guess he's going to go home now. Too bad, there's still a condom left.* He sighed, sat up, and turned the lamp on, then picked up what was left of his beer. He took a few swallows, realized how much semen there was on him and the bed, and he got up to change the sheets.

Brad bundled up the dirty sheets and headed for the bathroom, expecting to find Linn in there cleaning up. The bar of soap on the counter was wet, a washrag hung on the rack over the tub, but there was no sign of the rancher.

Resigned to the fact the man was leaving, Brad wandered out into the kitchen to find Linn standing in front of the kitchen window. He was fully dressed and had a bottle of beer in his hand.

"Are you all right?"

Linn nodded.

"Tired?"

The rancher replied with another nod of his head.

"Going home?"

A third nod.

Brad saw movement beyond the window, but he only caught a quick glimpse of something that had moved too fast for him to discern what it might have been. What he'd seen left him uneasy and wishing Linn weren't leaving him alone in the cabin. It was so far from Linn's house. *And what if Victor really is here stalking me? This place wouldn't be hard to get in if he really wanted to. The front picture window alone would make it easy. Smash and enter, no problem.*

"I know this is going to make me sound like a total wuss, but would you please stay? I'm not comfortable with the idea Victor might be around somewhere. I'm not much of a fighter, and I'd feel better if I weren't alone."

Linn didn't give him an answer. He lifted the beer to his lips and took a drink, but it gave Brad a look at his fingernails. Perfectly normal human fingernails.

After a moment, Linn put the empty bottle in the trash and headed for the front door. Brad followed him. He wasn't happy with how things were going. Not at all. Sure, the sex was good, but the instant they were done, Linn left.

That's all it is for him. Sex. A bit of fun. I shouldn't read anything into this. We're both going to get what we can, and then I'm going back to New York City and he's going to stay here and raise horses. And I already wish there could be more to this. I really like the way he fucks, the touch of his hands on me, the way he smiles. He's damn good-looking, and I wish I could stay here all the time, because, damn it, I think I'm falling for him. I guess basing a relationship purely on his sexual attraction for me won't work. Especially not with more than half of the country between us.

But I could come back next year...

Linn reached the door and peered outside into the night. He could feel the *thing* out there, but he could also tell it wasn't ready to make its move. Not yet.

"Brad, I want you to stay inside, no matter what you hear or think you see. And keep the door locked. I'm going to check on my horses and the house. I won't be gone long."

"You're coming back, then?"

Linn nodded. "Yeah, but I'll have to get out of here at four in the morning. I don't want the hands to know what we're doing."

"Not a problem, and thanks," Brad said.

"For what?"

"Not thinking I'm a wuss because being alone out here is making me uneasy."

"Being prudent and taking precautions isn't being a wuss. It's being a survivor." Linn stepped close to Brad. Mingled with the scent of sex and sweat, he could detect the fear that crept through Brad like tiny mice in the walls of his psyche. He took Brad in his arms and gave him a gentle kiss meant to reassure him.

"I told you I won't let anything happen to you, Brad, and I meant it."

"Aren't you nervous about going to your house?"

Linn grinned. "Now what do you think?" he asked.

"I think you're slightly crazy to go out there in the dark alone and unarmed."

"I might be alone, and it might be dark, but I'm *never* unarmed." He patted Brad's shoulder. "Why don't you go get cleaned up? The sooner I leave, the sooner I'll be back."

"Okay," Brad said, but he appeared no happier about Linn leaving.

"Brad, trust me, please. I know what I'm telling you sounds a bit odd, but believe me, Victor can't get in unless you permit it."

The author's puzzled brown eyes regarded him a moment. "I don't even want to know what's going on," he finally admitted.

Linn gave him a quick hug. "This is probably true, so we'll leave it at keep the doors locked and don't open them for anyone, not even me."

Brad's confusion deepened. "Then how will you get back in?"

"I'll get a spare key from the house." He gave Brad a kiss, hugged him tightly, and left, stepping out of the warm cabin into the cool mountain night.

Stars glittered above, peeking through the trees, and he could smell the wildflowers and green growing things.

He could also smell the dusty odor that hung in the chill air. The stink of death lay in that smell, as did the odor of old blood. Linn's own power stirred in answer, a soft growl trying to erupt from his throat. He held it in check, refused to allow himself to be pushed into fighting on the *thing's* terms.

Linn left the meadow around the cabin and walked into the thick darkness of the woods. He could see perfectly well, so he wasn't concerned that the creature that called itself Victor could sneak up on him in the cloying shadows.

He wended his way through the trees, alert for Victor, but mulling the situation with Brad and the *thing* over in his head. He'd worked hard to get a good reputation and become a success with his ranch of colored horses. Setting the place up with good breeding stock had taken every dime he had and five years of hard, unrelenting work. He wasn't about to let an inhuman *thing* take that away from him.

But I'm willing to risk it over a tight ass and a handsome face? Make sense of that. No, it makes perfect sense. It's been too long since I had a lover, and yet, why did I choose Bradford Thorne? He's going to leave in a month, and then what? I'll never see him again is what. And I will have risked this for a few weeks of great sex. I want more than that. I want him to stay, to be my lover in

every sense of that word, and I know he's not interested. He's got his own life in New York.

Too late for regret. Done is done. He knows I'm not human, but he doesn't know what I am, which is still a huge risk. Hunters won't relent if they discover he's been with something not human.

I wonder how big an if that is these days, though. I haven't heard of any hunters in three or four years. Maybe they can't hunt as openly anymore because of increased police activity. The world's a different place than it was in 1935, or even in '64. And they certainly can't blurt out, Oh, he wasn't human, so it's not really murder, because no one will believe them.

Still, is the risk to Brad really worth this?

Come to think of it, he's been with Victor; he's been at risk and didn't even know it. So I'm not the one who originally put him in danger; Victor did. Of course, Victor wouldn't care. His kind never does.

He crossed through the line of trees to arrive in sight of his house, the stables, and the paddocks that contained everything he'd worked so hard to build.

The horses in the nearest paddock trotted up, getting as close to him as they could against the intervening fence. Linn stopped to look them over. All three of them, two mares and a yearling colt, were frothed with sweat, and he could smell the fear they exuded. He reached out and patted all three of them, offering reassurance through his touch and with soft whickers that rumbled in his chest. Both mares pressed their faces to his chest, and the yearling snuffled and whinnied his terror.

They're too close to the woods. They're sensing Victor, or he's deliberately scaring them. Either way, they need to be farther from the trees, somewhere they'll feel safe.

"Easy, my fine beauties, I'll not let anything hurt you," he murmured and hopped over the fence. He headed across the paddock with the three animals

following right on his heels, knowing they were safe in his presence. Linn opened the paddock gate and led the terrified horses to the stable, putting each one in a stall. He washed the salt from their coats and covered each of them with a light blanket to keep the chill off. Done with that, he gave them each a small ration of oats and some fresh hay to soothe their frazzled nerves, made sure they had plenty of water, checked on the other horses in the stalls, and then went inside his house. Everything inside was as he'd left it, and he got no sense the *thing* had dared come inside.

While the *thing* could get in, the very nature of its kind prevented it from having power over others should it enter without the proper invitation.

He could sense it out there, among the trees. It watched and waited.

It wasn't ready to attack.

Not yet.

Linn could sense that too, somehow.

But it would come for Brad soon.

He grabbed some clean clothes and the box of condoms and shoved them into a paper bag. From the kitchen, he snagged a package of beef jerky and a six-pack of beer in an effort to make the *thing* think those were the reasons he went up to the house. Linn left the house, locking the door behind him. He headed to the cabin.

He could feel *it* watching him, and when he looked at the trees ahead of him he caught a glimpse of eyes. Eyes that glowed a sullen red like embers from the floor of hell.

He blinked, and they were gone.

But Linn knew he hadn't imagined those eyes. He'd seen their like before, long ago, in part of a past he'd tried to forget.

I swear to Epona, mother of all horses, I'll not let you have Bradford Thorne. You'll not destroy him the way that French bastard, Luc, destroyed my Samuel. I

should have killed that miserable thing when I had the chance. I won't let history repeat itself. I won't let you kill Brad.

A fierce protectiveness welled up inside Linn, and his canine teeth begin to lengthen. He fought the emotion that rampaged through him. He was becoming very attached to Brad, but he couldn't let his feelings get the better of him. Not with a dangerous enemy lurking in the woods.

He reached the cabin and unlocked the door.

Brad stood a few feet away, face pale as the visage of a corpse.

Linn put the things he'd brought with him down on the couch and locked the door. He went to Brad and took the frightened man into his arms. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Brad shuddered, his arms tightening around Linn. "It's Victor. He's the one out there. He was calling to me from outside, telling me he wanted to see me, that he loves me."

"Do you believe him?" Linn asked. He wanted to know how tight the hold was on Brad. The fact that Brad hadn't opened the door told him a lot. Victor might have a claw in Brad, but he didn't have full control of the author.

"No, of course not! He's a lying, selfish bastard with delusions of superiority. I told him to leave, to go back to New York, but I don't think he's going to do that."

"Neither do I," Linn replied truthfully. "I don't think he'll bother you again tonight. Why don't we get some sleep?"

Brad nodded his agreement. "Yeah, I'm tired."

Linn got the stuff off the couch, put the stuff he'd brought with him into the kitchen, and led Brad to the bedroom. "You'll feel better after you get some rest," he told the author.

"You're staying?"

"You bet," Linn agreed as he started to undress.

Brad gave him a big, thankful smile. "Good."

Undressed, Linn got into bed beside an equally naked Brad. He pulled the man into his arms and held him close. "You get some sleep. I'll be right here. Nothing's going to happen to you."

"Promise?" Brad asked, already sounding sleepy to Linn.

"I promise."

Outside, the *thing* prowled around through the woods. It kept its distance from the cabin, but Linn didn't know how long the *thing* would stay away. Things like Victor weren't used to being denied what they wanted. And what they wanted, they usually got.

Not this time. Brad is mine, and you're not getting him. No fucking way.

Chapter Nine

Brad woke up to a warm mouth wrapped around his erection, a groan on his lips, and a totally darkened room, which told him dawn hadn't arrived.

He reached down and caressed Linn's shoulder, then moved to touch the bobbing head before running his fingers through the rancher's soft hair.

What a way to start the morning, he thought. I've got a hot cowboy sucking my dick. Does life get any better than this?

Linn stopped what he was doing and said, "Morning. I wanted some eggs for breakfast." He caressed Brad's balls, which sent another warm flood of pleasure through Brad. "Hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," Brad replied as his cock was engulfed in the cowboy's mouth.

"Turn yourself around, and I'll return the favor."

Linn chuckled, which sent a vibration through Brad's cock that wrenched a gasp from him. The rancher scooted around, and they both got into position. Brad tossed his leg over Linn's shoulder and lifted his head, shoving a pillow beneath it so he could easily reach what he wanted: a thick, veiny piece of man meat. He licked the head, savoring the feel and taste of the other man as he darted the tip of his tongue into the slit. He smiled at the soft groan the act elicited from Linn. Brad had always enjoyed sucking cock—it had been a major factor for him in realizing he *was* gay—and Linn's flavor and size made it a greater pleasure.

Hands grabbed his butt cheeks and hauled him closer, and Linn took Brad's entire cock into his mouth. The action of Linn's tongue as it laved the

head and stroked down the underside of the shaft felt incredible, and Brad redoubled his own efforts.

Brad licked and sucked as his own cock was sucked and stroked by Linn's tongue. Linn's hands alternately kneaded his butt, touched his anus with teasing thrusts of a finger, or gripped his behind and held him still. Without warning, Linn released Brad's cock and sucked his balls into the confines of his hot mouth. It felt amazing, wonderful, and he cried out with the feeling, relinquishing Linn's cock to suck the rancher's balls. He gave as good as he received.

Linn released his balls and took Brad's cock into his mouth again. Linn's tongue flicked across the head rapidly, and then Linn took Brad's dick deep into his mouth, until the head bumped at the back of his throat.

Brad groaned and gripped Linn's cock in his fist. He swept the head with the flat of his tongue, pointed it, and darted it into the slit of Linn's erection, then smiled at the sound of pleasure Linn gave as he continued to lick while he stroked the shaft with his fist.

Linn gave a wordless cry, and fluid spurted into Brad's mouth. He swallowed as his own body tensed. Linn's hand gripped Brad's balls, rolling them as the ball sac pulled tight to his body and the first wash of orgasm filled Brad. "Linn, oh damn..." he groaned as the white flash of orgasm crested and shattered through him, his dick yielding up the flood that had been building.

He felt Linn swallow his cum down, his tongue lapping across Brad's cock as the last of the spasms faded. "Damn fine breakfast you gave me, Brad. Thanks."

Brad chuckled. "Anytime, partner," he murmured. "If you're really hungry, I can get out some toaster waffles and syrup, make some coffee, do the domestic thing."

"Nah, it's all right. I've got to get up to the house. The hands will be along for work soon. I've got to make a pot of joe for us to get the blood going. You're

welcome to come up to the house if you want.” Linn patted Brad's behind, a gesture Brad thought seemed appreciative rather than possessive.

He felt Linn roll off the bed, but Brad wasn't ready to move quite yet. He wanted to enjoy the languid feel of a body well pleased for a bit longer. Besides, it was very early for him; he usually didn't climb out of bed until closer to eight in the morning. But he decided to offer his lover a bit of hospitality.

“I'll be over later to chop wood. I've got to get some writing done this morning. I've only got the rest of this month to get it done.”

“Take your time, get your work done. The firewood's no hurry,” Linn replied. Brad could hear the rustle of cloth as Linn dressed. Felt the man's weight as he sat down to put on his socks and boots.

“I might go back to sleep for a bit.”

“Sounds like a good idea. You were up late, and I woke you up pretty early,” Linn agreed.

The bed shifted again as Linn stood. The man bent over the bed to give Brad a kiss on the cheek. Not satisfied with that, Brad rolled over and put his arms around Linn's neck, giving the cowboy a thorough kiss before he let Linn go.

Linn stood there, gazing down at him, a huge grin spreading across his face. “I'm thinking waking up in your bed might become a habit.”

“I'm thinking waking up in your bed might be fun,” Brad countered.

Linn's smile faltered, and a dark *something* passed through his eyes.

Oops, shouldn't have said that. I don't think he's willing to have me in his house. Maybe there's stuff he's got in there that he doesn't want me to see. Maybe there are clues to what he really is or personal things he doesn't like to share.

“Sorry, didn't mean to be pushy.”

"You weren't being pushy," Linn said. "But if I'm coming from your cabin, I can say I dropped by to check on you. If you're seen leaving my house this early..." Linn's words trailed off, the rancher not finishing what he'd been about to say, but Brad could fill in the missing details. If he were seen leaving the house that early, it might lead to speculation on the part of his workers, and if Linn was as closeted about being gay as Brad suspected, well, it wouldn't be a good idea for anyone to see him leaving Linn's ranch house at seven or eight in the morning. It would sure cause eyebrows to raise and bring up questions Linn didn't want asked.

Let the world think Linn is a career-driven man with no time for ladies; it's better for him. He's got to live here among these people, and I go home in a month, Brad mused.

"See you later?" he asked, expecting the man to come back.

Linn's head tilted to the right, and he regarded Brad for a while before he replied, "If you want me to."

"I think we've still got a condom left."

Linn's grin returned as if it had never left. "We've got most of a box left, actually. I brought the rest over from the house."

"Oh, well, then I'll make us something for dinner. When do you think you'll be back?"

Linn's laughter filled the cabin, the sound happy, pleased. "I guess I could be back around, oh, sixish. Does that sound good to you?"

"Sixish sounds fine. You're sure it won't cut into your workday too much?" Brad didn't want the man to rush; he knew from his childhood that farms—or ranches—had lots of daily chores that needed doing.

"Make it seven," Linn said. "That way I can make sure we're done for the day and get a good shower before I come over."

"Seven it is, then."

Linn leaned over him, braced his hands on Brad's shoulders, and gave him a lingering kiss that left Brad's cock hard and aching for more.

"Keep that thought," Linn remarked. Brad gasped when Linn's hand closed around his dick and gave a few slow, firm strokes.

"You tease," Brad accused.

Linn nodded. "Yep, you got it. Give you something to think about until I come back later."

"As if I *needed* that sort of a distraction," Brad replied sourly. "I've got a sci-fi book to write, and it's hard enough to work when I know there's a hot, sexy cowboy out there working nearby. Takes a lot of control to stay focused on my writing, let me tell you."

"You think it's any easier for me when I know right past the trees at the edge of the ranch I've got a sexy man waiting for me to come and fuck him?"

Brad laughed. "I guess we're both going to have to suffer through another day, somehow."

"Yep, we are. And I better get going. The boys get really cranky if there's no coffee waiting for them when they roll in."

Brad was treated to one final kiss, and then Linn headed out. Brad heard the door close and lock behind Linn. He sighed, closed his eyes, and drifted to sleep, happy and content for the first time in quite a while.

* * * * *

Amazed at how fast the day went by—and surprised that the *thing* lurking in the woods had gone quiet—Linn watched Roy's pickup truck head down the driveway. Everyone else was already gone, which left him and Brad alone on the ranch.

Alone with the *thing*.

It seemed to realize the rest of the men were gone, because the instant Linn sensed Roy's truck had left the drive and crossed onto the main road, *it*

came awake. He could feel the *thing* out there the way a child felt a loose tooth, as a pesky ache that wouldn't go away.

Linn sighed and headed into the house to get cleaned up.

I think tonight will be it. I'm pretty sure the thing is ready to make its move.

He went inside, locked the door, and headed for the shower. Once he had thoroughly washed—he was not about to head to his lover's reeking of horses—he got dressed in a slightly tattered pair of jeans and a T-shirt that had seen far better days.

I've got the feeling I don't want to be wearing anything good tonight. There's no point in getting good clothes shredded up if it does come down to a fight to save Brad tonight. He passed through the kitchen on his way out and grabbed the six-pack of expensive microbrewery limited-edition beer he'd put in there to chill that morning. He hoped the stuff would impress Brad. He hadn't tried to woo a man in a long time, and it was the best weapon he had in his limited arsenal.

Witty conversation has never been one of my strong suits. Hell, the things I'm best at are raising horses, drinking, and fucking, and only the last has a chance of getting another man's attention.

He locked the door behind him, even engaging the dead bolt to be safe before he headed for the woods. Tonight he'd made sure all his stock was stabled, which would prevent the *thing* from getting at his horses. The last thing he needed was to find one of his prize mares or a foal killed the way the deer had been killed.

Only a matter of time until this is over. Then Brad and I can both rest easy.

Unless it kills me.

He didn't want to really consider that possibility, but it *was* possible. He could be killed; it just wasn't easy to do. Not for a mortal. But for this *thing*, the process wasn't as hard.

Linn got through the woods around the cabin and hurried across the meadow to find the porch covered with red rose petals and entire flowers scattered across the wooden surface.

Oh yeah, tonight is definitely the night.

He was about to unlock the door, when it swung open to reveal Brad. The author gave him a tense smile, and his gaze on Linn showed his fear. "He was on the porch right before you arrived."

"Let's get inside," Linn said and urged Brad to go inside. The smell of meatloaf and mashed potatoes reached Linn, and his stomach growled. He ignored it. The feeling of eyes watching him made the skin between his shoulders itch.

"He's in the trees. I can see him. He's watching us," Brad said. But Linn didn't need the author's report to know the *thing* was there, watching and waiting. He could feel the steady beat of its anger, like the waves of a poisoned sea rolling over him.

"Inside," Linn repeated, pushing the author into the living room. He shut and locked the dead bolt on the cabin door.

"Aren't you going to tell him to leave?" Brad asked, his expression one of bewilderment.

Linn shook his head. "He wouldn't listen, even if I did."

Brad sank onto the couch and covered his face with his hands. "I just want him gone. That's all. I just want him to go away and stay away."

Linn set the beer down on the coffee table and put a reassuring hand on Brad's shoulder. "It's going to be okay, Brad. I'll make sure he never bothers you, but there are a few rules in this sort of thing, and one of them is I can't attack him until he makes the first move. He hasn't done anything to hurt you or me."

Brad lifted his gaze to stare at Linn, incredulous. "Rules? He's stalking me. What more has to happen? Do we have to wait until he tries to kill one of us? I don't understand, Linn."

Linn sighed and sat down on the couch beside Brad. "There's no real way to make this easier, so I'm going to say it, and you can think what you want, Brad."

Brad's gaze filled with concern. "All right."

Linn took a deep breath and launched into the words that would forever change Brad's world. "Victor isn't human."

"I think you've mentioned that."

"What I didn't tell you is, he's an undead *thing* that's latched onto your soul."

Brad's face lost its last trace of color. "He's an un—" The man couldn't go on; he simply sat back on the couch and stared at the ceiling.

"That's how he could follow you, how he knew where you were going. He could read your mind, so he knew exactly where you were going. I guess he thought if he followed you out here, he'd have free rein to do as he pleased. Except I'm here, which puts you in my territory. He can't do anything to you without my permission, unless he turns rogue. And considering he entered my territory without my permission and wounded Dingbat, he's probably already a rogue. By the rules that govern supernatural kind, if he tries to do you any harm in my territory, he forfeits his protection under the law."

"And that means what?"

"That means it's open season on Victor."

"So what do we do? Wait until he comes crashing through the window to get me or something?"

Linn nodded. "Or something." The smell of the food made Linn's stomach give a bad-tempered snarl.

Brad's lips curled in a wry grin. "No sense dying on an empty stomach, is there?"

"Who said anything about either of us dying?" Linn asked.

"I'll try to be more optimistic, but the only thing I know about undead horrors comes from Stephen King and Dean Koontz novels."

"Stephen King definitely, maybe some Richard Matheson or Robert McCammon thrown in for good measure."

"I don't think I really want to know," Brad stated as he headed for the kitchen.

Linn followed. "For your sanity, it's probably better if you don't. Too much weirdness can cause mental and emotional trauma most humans can't cope with."

"Well, authors aren't known for being 'normal,' so I might handle it better than most do, but I'd still rather not know exactly what Victor is."

"That's fine by me. When the time comes, I'll take care of him," Linn assured.

Brad took the meatloaf out of the oven, and Linn inhaled appreciatively. "Smells good," he said, giving a compliment where it was due. The meatloaf was nicely browned on top, and the smell of beef, spices, and onions made saliva flood his mouth. He swallowed and waited for Brad to set the hot baking pan down before he leaned in and gave Brad a quick kiss.

"Wow, if that's what you do when you smell a meatloaf, what will you do for a couple of slices?"

Linn gave the man a lascivious grin. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Yes, I think I would," Brad agreed, giving a laugh constrained by the stress of Victor's presence.

Brad sliced and served the meatloaf, instant mashed potatoes, and microwaved peas while Linn got the beer from the coffee table and opened two of them.

"So where did you learn to cook?" Linn asked as they sat down at the small kitchen table.

"I like meatloaf sandwiches, so I learned to make meatloaf. It's also a way of making my royalties go farther, and it keeps me at home working instead of running to restaurants for meals."

"When I want something that doesn't come out of a can or a nuke-and-eat box, I head for the diner," Linn admitted as he took a bite. "Oh wow," he said as the flavors burst across his tongue. The food was hot, but it tasted great and Linn couldn't stop himself from wolfing it down.

"Hungry much?" Brad asked.

"Starving. Ranch work is very physical, gives you a good workout."

"I noticed," Brad commented. "Want more?"

"Hell yes," Linn said and let Brad take his plate. When it was put down in front of him again, there were two more slices of meatloaf, more peas, and a scoop of mashed potatoes liberally sprinkled with pan drippings.

"How's the book going?"

"I'll start drafting chapter two tomorrow. I really made good progress."

"Yeah, I noticed you didn't come up to the house to chop wood."

"I was rolling along so well, I didn't want to stop."

"That's okay. You stay here and work, at least until Victor is taken care of," Linn told him.

"That was another reason I didn't leave. I wasn't too sure about walking alone through the woods. I mean, I'm not a coward or anything, but for all I know, he might have a gun."

Linn nodded. "Well, if we're still dealing with this Victor situation tomorrow and you want to come up to work, let me know before I leave in the morning. I'll come and get you. Maybe I'll have you help clean stables instead of chopping wood."

"He can come for me as easily there as he can anywhere else."

Linn shook his head and swallowed the meatloaf he had in his mouth. "I don't want anything to happen to my horses, so there are special protections on the stable. He can't get close to it, much less go in there."

"So what are we going to do tonight?"

Linn grinned at his lover. "I thought we'd eat dinner, drink beer, and fuck, unless you have a better plan."

Brad returned Linn's grin, his dark eyes sparkling with amused joy. "I can't think of anything better to do. Besides, I like the sound of the plan you've come up with."

"Good." Linn resumed eating. *He's a pretty good cook. Sure beats what I'm able to make. I enjoy his company too, which is another plus right up there with the sex.*

Too bad there's no way he can stay. I think I'd like that.

Chapter Ten

They'd finished their meal, and Brad put the leftovers away while Linn cleaned up the dishes. Done with the household chores, Brad put two of bottles of the beer Linn brought into the fridge, grabbed the other two bottles, and headed for the bedroom. Linn, with a grin to rival the Cheshire cat's, followed behind him.

"Condoms in the bathroom?" Linn asked.

"The box is, but I put an entire strip by the bed. I figured we'd need at least one condom, but I'm hoping we can use a few more than that."

"I like how you think," Linn remarked as he sat down on the bed to take off his boots.

Brad hadn't said anything to Linn about the ragged condition of his clothes. It was the first time the rancher had come to the cabin dressed in such worn-out jeans, and the shirt was even worse, though Brad had to admit it was nice getting sneak peeks of Linn's muscular body through the holes. *Maybe he needs to do laundry and hasn't taken the time to do it because he's coming back here every night.*

The cowboy took off his boots and set them aside.

A few thumps on the roof reminded Brad that Victor the Undead Thing was still out there.

"I don't know if I can do this with him banging on the roof. What if he breaks in through a window while we're fucking?"

Linn's amber gaze regarded him, the man's expression thoughtful. "I guess I'd have to kick his ass."

"I'm serious, Linn."

"So am I," his lover replied. "And I don't think he'll come in here by force. Outside, we'd be on fairly equal footing, but in here he'd be at a serious disadvantage."

Brad frowned because what Linn had said made no sense. "Why?"

"Because he wouldn't be invited. They have to be invited in or their power over a person is limited. And if they aren't invited in, they can be forced to leave. It's one of the unbreakable rules their kind lives by."

"Rules? I don't understand," Brad admitted. He sat down next to Linn, and the rancher slipped an arm around him, pulling him close.

"Every supernatural being has certain assets and drawbacks that are innate to their species."

"Drawbacks? You mean like werewolves and silver, or vampires and garlic?"

Linn nodded. "Now you're getting it. Unfortunately, the garlic isn't true as far as vampires go. Some of them dislike it, and it can make older ones choke because they're sensitive to strong odors."

"Oh, then what works against them?"

"Depends on the type of vampire. Asian ones have a compulsion to stop and count small seeds, like lentils, rice, or millet. If there are a lot of seeds to count and the sun comes up while they're counting, they burst into flame and die. Eastern European vampires can't cross running water. To really put an end to them you have to cut off their heads and bury their bodies at a crossroad, and it has to be done facedown, so they can't find their way back to their former village. Fire's another sure way to kill them. So is being killed by another supernatural being, though some are better able to do it than others."

"Okay, so why tell me this?" Brad asked.

Linn shrugged. "You were curious about supernatural beings, so I gave you some examples."

Brad nodded. "So what else can you tell me about vampires?"

"Heavy clothes have always been a protection for vampires. Some are able to tolerate the touch of the setting sun. Others aren't. Then there's sunscreen. It protects them from the sun the way it protects a human. They wear sunglasses for the same reason. All of those protect a vampire from the power of the sun, if it's setting. Strong daylight still burns them, even with those safeguards."

Brad leaned into Linn's embrace. "You know a lot about supernatural kind, don't you?"

"Yes, because what you don't know can kill you."

"Victor wants to kill me, doesn't he?"

"He chose you to be his victim. He won't give up until you're his or he kills you."

At first the only words that fully registered in Brad's mind were *he kills you*. It sent a chill of dread through Brad. The *until you're his* sank in more slowly, and he turned his unhappy gaze on Linn. "His? What do you mean by *his*, Linn?"

"His goal might be to turn you into what he is," Linn told him in a soft whisper as the rancher reached up to caress Brad's cheek. "And you don't need to be afraid, Brad. I told you, I'll protect you from Victor."

Brad shuddered at the thought of being transformed into whatever Victor was, the idea of becoming something inhuman both disgusting and frightening. "Why, Linn? Why are you protecting me from Victor?"

"Because I like you. And because I lost someone a long time ago to something like Victor. I don't want the same thing to happen to you, Brad."

It made sense. He and Linn were lovers. And losing someone you cared about to an unholy *thing* like Victor had to go a long way to making you dislike the things.

"So it's partially a vendetta and partially because you're fucking me?"

Linn brushed a stray lock of hair from his face. "It's a whole lot more than that, Brad." The rancher leaned in and gave him a gentle kiss that went a long way to easing Brad's fears, for reasons he didn't comprehend. All he knew was the fear faded under the gentle pressure of Linn's lips on his. He opened his mouth, and Linn's tongue slid inward, its touch as gentle as the kiss. Reassurance rather than an assault meant to arouse desire.

Brad returned the kiss. He thrust his tongue into Linn's mouth, ready for more than talk and reassurances. He needed Linn. Wanted to feel the rancher's arms around him, his cock inside his needy butt. Wanted to forget the *thing* stalking him, intent on having him either dead or undead.

Linn's hand cupped the nape of his neck, his other arm around Brad's waist as his tongue fondled Brad's and tasted the inside of his mouth. Brad reached between them and found the hard line of Linn's erection encased in his jeans. Linn groaned, and their kiss came to an abrupt end.

"You're sure you want to do this?" Linn asked. His hand moved from the back of Brad's neck to clasp his erection.

Brad nodded. "I need the distraction."

Linn tugged off his shirt and tossed it aside. "Me too," he agreed as another round of banging echoed through the cabin from the roof.

Brad's heart started to hammer inside his chest, and the icy blast of terror raced through his veins. "Or maybe not," he muttered, his body shaking from the suddenness of the sound and the knowledge of what had made the noise.

Linn's hands moved to hold his head, the rancher forcing him to meet his gaze. "Brad, listen to me, please. He cannot come in here. Not even through the window, unless one of us gives him permission to enter."

"But what if he does? What if he doesn't care about the rules?"

"It doesn't work like that. He can't overcome his own nature. He can't go against the ingrained rules of his kind any more than you could choose to stop breathing."

"You're sure?"

"Completely. So calm down and take it easy."

Linn let go of his face and reached past him to pick up one of the beers off the bedside table. "Drink this and relax. Pretend he's not out there."

"Easy for you to say," Brad remarked as he took the beer and drank some of it.

"As soon as he's ready to face me over you, I'll take care of him and this will be over."

"But how long is that going to take?"

Linn gave him a grim smile. "I think fucking you one more time should do it."

Brad thought it over, not that it took much thought. He wanted Linn's cock, and he wanted Victor gone. It was pretty much a no-brainer. He set the half-empty bottle on the side table and started to undress.

Linn patted him on the shoulder. "Good choice."

This time he didn't even bother waiting for the foreplay, Brad crawled onto the bed and lay down with his cock standing and his legs spread. He held his arms out to Linn. "I'm ready if you are."

A rumble of laughter and a smile were the first part of Linn's answer to Brad's remark. "That's the problem with you city types, always in a rush," Linn said, pretending to complain when the truth of the matter was he wanted Brad and he wanted him now.

He dropped his jeans on the floor and crawled onto the bed, heading for the territory between the man's firm thighs. He stroked his hands along Brad's legs, enjoying the feel of solid muscle under his palms and fingers.

"Hmm...sound legs, no sign of lameness," he commented and got the exact reaction he wanted from Brad: the author laughed at his joke.

"Want to check my teeth too?"

Linn shook his head. "You should never look a gift horse in the mouth."

"If anything around here is lame, it's your sense of humor." Brad sat up, grabbed the back of Linn's head, and set his lips to Linn's in a kiss that went from sweet and pleasant to something that could have burned the chrome off the bumper of a '67 Chevy. Brad's hand closed around Linn's hard cock and stroked it slowly as he continued the kiss. Linn groaned at the dual sensations. He was used to being the aggressor in bed, but he found he was enjoying the author's skilled kiss, as well as the feel of the other man's hand on his cock. Not bad, not bad at all, Linn thought as he closed his hand around Brad's dick and began to stroke it.

For a while, Linn let himself become lost in sensation. The dance of tongues, the feel of a hand on his cock while he stroked Brad's hardness made the situation with Victor fade to the background, losing some of the importance it carried in the tide of pleasure.

When he felt the need for air overshadowing everything else, Linn broke the kiss. He stared at Brad with newfound amazement and said, "Damn, that was something."

Brad actually smirked. "Glad you enjoyed it."

"Hell yes, I enjoyed it. Why didn't you kiss me like that before?"

Brad shrugged. "Guess I wasn't ready for it."

Linn grinned and shook his head. "Well, I hope you're ready to do it again, and soon."

Brad returned his grin and opened his mouth to reply when something hit the roof with blows that left Linn feeling as if they were inside a drum.

He sighed. "He's got terrible timing."

"Yeah, and he sounds really pissed off," Brad commented, his gaze on the ceiling.

"Too bad," Linn remarked as he pushed Brad to the bed. Their lips met in another kiss. He liked the feel of the author under him, liked the way the man's

body fit to his, the way Brad moaned as they fucked. Linn liked talking to him too, which was also a plus.

Another rumbling sound reached them, but this time the sound was distant and had a totally different quality to it.

Brad turned his head, breaking their kiss. "What was that?" he asked as he glanced around the room.

"Thunder. I guess it's going to rain," Linn remarked and resumed their interrupted kiss.

This time when Linn ended their kiss, he reached for the condoms on the table and tore one open. He was about to remove it from the package when Brad took it out of his hand and rolled it over Linn's erect cock, stroking Linn's needy flesh as he applied it.

"I want you," Linn told him as he took Brad into his arms and guided the other man downward. Brad spread his legs and raised them, putting his knees over Linn's shoulders. Linn smiled at the way his lover welcomed him without the need for words. He'd had many lovers over the years of his existence, but few had awakened the emotions this man, Bradley Thorne, awakened in him.

And he leaves in twenty-seven days. How can I accept never seeing him again?

Shit, I don't know if I can, but what choice is there?

Don't think about it. Think only of this moment. What the two of us are going to do. The pleasure we'll have.

He leaned down and kissed Brad.

Brad's arms went around his neck, and he returned the kiss.

Mouths locked in a prelude to the passion they were about to share, Linn moved and nudged his lover's opening with the head of his prick.

A soft moan of encouragement from Brad was the last incentive Linn required. He sank his cock inside Brad, enjoying the sound of the man's deep groan as the hard rod of flesh slid inside. Linn started to move, but he kept the

pace slow and easy. He wanted Brad to ask for more, wanted to hear the author crying out for him to go harder, faster.

The kiss ended when Brad turned his head to moan, "Please, Linn, please."

Linn chuckled. "Please what?"

"Harder, fuck me harder."

Linn gazed down at the man beneath him. Brad's cheeks were flushed with passion, his eyes half closed, lips parted as he gasped for breath. Instead of doing what Brad asked, Linn lowered his head to kiss the author. Brad moaned, the vibration of his cry filling Linn's chest, echoing in his mind.

The *thing* outside hammered on the wall of the cabin. Linn ignored it. To his amazement, so did Brad, who instead of reacting with fear, didn't react to the outside annoyance. He was completely focused on the pleasure.

Linn gave Brad what he wanted and sped up the thrusting of his dick. The author gasped, a shudder passing through his body as he clung tighter to Linn. But he changed the tempo only a small amount. *This needs to last. I want that bastard Victor good and mad. That way he won't hesitate to come after me when I leave.*

Plans set, Linn returned his full attention to Brad. He kissed the author, then reached between them to grasp Brad's erection. He ran the pad of this thumb over the head, using the slick beads of precum there to enhance the pleasure he was giving to his lover. Brad gave a long groan, and his hands gripped Linn's shoulders tightly.

Linn retained the pace until his own body refused the rhythm in need of more. Linn sped up with a suddenness that brought an ecstatic cry from Brad. As Linn drove his dick into Brad hard and fast, the pleasure increased, driving him to go faster and faster, and his entire body became lost in the wonderful sensation of being encased in Brad. The feel of willing flesh surrounding his cock, the tight hold of another man's arms around him as they fucked.

He loved it. Loved the feel of his lover.

And to his surprise, he realized he also loved Brad, despite the fact that he hardly knew him. They'd only met a few days ago, but he *did* have an emotional attachment to the man. A strong one.

"Linn!" the man cried out under him as fluid spurted from the cock in Linn's fist. A few hard, rough thrusts and Linn was with his lover, his body erupting in an orgasm so hard, he saw white points of light dancing across a bloodred field in his vision.

He groaned, heard an answering gasp from Brad, and Linn backed away enough to get Brad's legs off his shoulders. He sank down onto his lover and lay there with his eyes closed, body relaxed. Linn drifted in the half doze of postcoitus with Brad's arms draped across his shoulders. He needed to move, to go get cleaned up and be ready to face Victor's wrath.

Abruptly, he sat up.

He reached out with his own inhuman senses and felt the *thing* was some distance away from the cabin. It was near his own house, near the stables. He could feel the hate, the desire to ruin and destroy that filled Victor.

The stable. He's going to try and set it on fire.

"I have to go," he said and got off Brad. He tossed the used condom into the bedside trash can and grabbed his jeans off the floor.

"What is it?"

"Victor's after my horses!"

"Oh shit, no!" Brad grabbed for his own clothing. Linn tore the man's pants out of his grasp. "No, you can't go with me! You stay here! Stay inside. Keep the door locked," he said, his tone making the words an order.

Linn saw the blackness of his fingernails, heard the harsh growl in his voice. He didn't care if Brad saw him, heard the beast in his voice. Keeping his true nature hidden no longer mattered.

All that mattered now was stopping Victor.

He ran for the door, unlocked it, and hurried out into the night. Thunder rumbled and the first drops of rain pattered down in the wildflowers as he jumped from the porch. Linn heard the click of the door closing, followed by the snap of the lock as it engaged.

He glanced at the cabin from the edge of the woods to find Brad watching him from the large picture window.

Epona, mother of all horses, give him the sense to stay inside.

He raced through the woods, saw an angry orange light flickering in the distance. Heard the first shrill scream of terrified horses as the smoke and flames tore at the stable.

He's set the stable on fire. How could he do that? The stable is protected. Now I'm sure I'm going to kill him. If he can bypass the magic protecting the stable, he's too dangerous to be allowed to live.

Chapter Eleven

Lightning flashed across the darkness and flooded the room with a brilliance that chased away the night for a moment. The rain came down in windblown sheets, sweeping across the night like the shrouds of unseen ghosts.

Brad watched the storm through the living room window. He held a bottle of beer in his hand, and the cold brew chilled his fingers.

He stood there with his gaze focused in the direction where he knew the house lay. He'd been certain he'd seen fire beyond the trees a short time ago. But now all he could see were the storm-lashed trees.

Another bolt lit the sky, deepening the shadows under the trees. Something moved in the shadows. Brad stepped closer to the window, trying to figure out what he'd seen.

Are some of the horses loose? Was that the stable burning earlier? If it wasn't, Linn wouldn't leave the horses out in weather like this. At least I don't think he would.

He struggled to see through the rain, gaze focused toward the trees, trying to see what was out there. It had been too big to be Dingbat, and like the horses, Brad doubted Linn would leave the dog outside in such a storm.

Wait, it can't be the dog. I'm sure Linn left him at the vet's office. I know either Roy or Joe said he was hurt pretty bad.

The sky brightened under the lash of the storm. This time the lightning hit much closer, because Brad heard a tree shatter and fall somewhere in the

forest to the rear of the cabin. "Okay, that was a little *too* close," he remarked to himself as he lifted the bottle of beer to his lips.

He saw motion again. A black form moving through the rain. He got even closer to the window and saw something man-shaped coming across the rain-drenched meadow.

Who the hell could that be out there in the middle of this? Maybe it's Linn coming back to make sure I'm safe. But he's got to be crazy coming out in a storm like this, Victor or no Victor.

He went to the door and turned on the porch light to give Linn something to steer by in the darkness. He unlocked the door and opened it. "Are you out of your mind coming out on a night like this?" he called.

He peered into the lash of the wind and rain. "Linn?" he called louder, wondering if his lover hadn't heard him, because he hadn't answered.

The figure got closer to the porch, the dim radiance of the bulb barely shedding enough light to reach the top stair.

Brad couldn't tell who it was in the dark.

The dark shape was almost to the porch.

Eyes that burned red as the coals of hell regarded Brad.

He felt his heart jump; his blood pounded through his veins. The first note of fear sang along his nerves. He slammed the door, closed and twisted the lock, and backed away.

The glowing eyes looked in the window. "Now, Bradford," he heard Victor say. "Is that any way to behave after I've come all this way to see you?"

A word flittered around in his head, but his conscious mind didn't want to accept that word as part of reality. He couldn't believe in the word. It was something unreal. Something out of legends and books. Out of books.

What did Linn say about legends? Something about how they come with a grain of truth at their core.

No, I'm not going to believe it.

But he'd believed Linn wasn't human. He'd seen the man's fingernails turn into black clawlike things.

Despite his denial, he couldn't shake the fact that a pair of glowing red eyes watched him from the other side of the window.

That word he didn't want to think about fluttered around in his head.

What Linn said to him regarding Victor slammed through his awareness with the force of a thrown brick striking his forehead.

He didn't want to accept it, but there were no other explanations. *Victor's not a just a thing, he's a bloodsucking vampire. That's what Linn meant when he mentioned Richard Matheson. Matheson wrote I Am Legend. There were vampires in that book. Lots of them. They made that movie with Will Smith based on that book not so long ago.*

Brad shuddered and moved even farther from the door.

"Let me in, Bradford." Fingers pallid as those of a corpse brushed at the window. "You can't escape me. I won't ever let you go. You're mine, and no one else will have you." The fingers twisted, and Victor's always neatly manicured nails turned into sharp talons. He scratched across the glass. The squeal made the hair on the back of Brad's neck rise, and goose bumps covered his arms. He shivered and backed away from the window until he was almost in the kitchen.

"Bradford, love, why won't you let me in?"

He couldn't take his gaze off the *thing* outside the window. The eyes burned into his mind. *His eyes, what's wrong with his eyes?* They never looked like that before. He wanted to back away farther from the front of the cabin, but instead he found himself taking a step forward. He was horrified at the prospect of walking to the door, of opening it to let Victor into the cabin. His mind rebelled, fighting the urge to go to the door, but he felt compelled. He took another hesitant step forward. He stopped. Looked away from the glowing eyes. The compulsion eased, but it wasn't gone.

What's happening to me? I don't want to go closer, and yet I'm being pulled like a marionette.

"Come to me, Bradford. Open the door and welcome me inside."

Brad fought the pull. *I won't be a vampire's dinner. No way.*

He felt something inside that wanted to respond to the words, but instead of going to open the door, he remained stationary. *He can't come in unless I give him permission. That's why he's trying to get me to open the door. All I have to do is wait. He'll have to leave when the sunlight gets too high in the sky, unless he's got something to protect him.*

Damn. But...how can Victor be a vampire? It's just too much to accept. He ate food and drank wine with me. Can vampires do that?

And yet I know Linn's right. Victor is a vampire. An undead, bloodsucking thing that wants to kill me.

The *thing* at the window turned and vanished off the porch. Brad heard the shrill scream of an enraged horse. He ran to the window and stared into the darkness to find the red-eyed thing battling with a horse. Lightning blazed across the sky. A coal black stallion stood on his hind legs flailing his forehooves at the *thing* with the burning eyes. The stallion's eyes burned too, but they were filled with the clean brilliance of sunlight.

Why do I get the feeling that's not a normal horse? More to the point, why do I get the feeling that horse is Linn?

Linn flailed his hooves at the vampire, trying to connect with the *thing*. But it was too fast for him. His hooves missed, and he spun in an effort to keep it from getting behind him.

Too late. The *thing's* talons scored stinging lines of pain across his flank. It hurt, but it would hardly prove fatal or debilitating.

"Wretched beast, the human is mine!"

Unable to speak in this form, Linn made no reply. He spun again, trying not to let the vampire get close enough to wound him. This time he lashed out with his rear hooves and heard a satisfying grunt and a hiss of pain from the undead *thing*.

Rain beat on him, almost blinding him for an instant as he whirled around to see Victor stagger away, clutching at his right arm, which hung limp.

Linn bared his teeth in a horsey grin and rushed at the vampire.

Cackling madly, Victor lunged for him, vampire teeth gleaming in a bright flash of lightning. The boom of the thunder covered Linn's shrill squeal of rage as the *thing's* teeth closed on his throat.

That's the last time you'll ever bite anything, bloodsucker.

Linn brought his left foreleg up hard. Bone crunched on impact. Vampires were tough, but they were brittle compared to other supernatural beings.

The vampire fell. Tried to crawl through the saturated meadow flowers.

Linn reared, bringing both front hooves down on the vampire's pelvis with a loud *crunch*.

The vampire bellowed in agony. "You fucking beast! I'll kill you!"

Sure you will, with both legs shattered to flinders.

Victor struggled onward, trying to reach the cabin.

He can't be stupid enough to think Brad will come to his rescue. Whatever power he had over Brad is gone. Which explained the funny feeling kissing him gave me the other day. It was the vampire's control breaking. Been so long since I've had to deal with a vampire, I forgot all about what it feels like when their control breaks.

He stalked after the vampire, letting it get close enough so that Brad would be sure to see it was Victor when he killed the damned thing.

Screaming wordless hate at Linn, the vampire leaped to his feet and came for Linn again. But this time Linn was ready. He lashed out with his right foreleg, the hoof impacting Victor's chest and sending the *thing* staggering. He

didn't give it a chance to regain its balance. He lashed out a second time, both front hooves connecting. Bones shattered, and the vampire fell facedown in a batch of pungent plants.

Wild garlic.

The vampire choked and started to gag.

Still grinning his horsey grin, Linn switched forms. In the blink of an eye, the stallion was gone, replaced by a huge black wolf. White fangs flashed. Bone crunched.

Victor turned over and whimpered. He clawed at Linn's furred chest, but Linn's grip on his throat was relentless. Linn shook his head. There was a snap, and for a moment Victor was missing his head. An instant later, nothing remained of Victor but a pile of steaming bones.

Shaking his head and pawing at his mouth, Linn wished he could spit in his wolf form. Vampires, especially ones as old as Victor, tasted terrible, and he'd just gotten quite a mouthful of pure nastiness.

He hurried for the cabin. He'd reached the bottom step when the cabin door swung open.

Brad stood there, eyes wide with horrified disbelief.

"Linn, is that you?" he asked.

In reply, Linn transformed to his human shape. Cold rain slid along his bare skin. Without his fur, he felt the cold, which made him shiver. "Yes. Need mouthwash. Vampire tastes bad." Talking wasn't easy, and he gave up. He hurried into the house and found what he needed in the bathroom. He washed his mouth out with water from the tap and followed it up by gargling Brad's mouthwash. It took repeated tries and half the bottle to get the horrid taste out of his mouth. When he was done, he knew what he'd find.

Brad. Standing in the door. Staring at him.

He'd felt the man's presence about the time he'd started the first round of mouthwash, so he felt no surprise. He gazed at the man he'd just fought for. He'd fought and killed an old vampire to protect a man he hardly knew.

It was something he hadn't done for Samuel, which was why, this time, he had to do it for Brad.

The terror and disbelief were still there on Brad's face. But those emotions were fading quickly, to be replaced by concern.

"Your butt's bleeding."

Linn twisted his head to try and look at the injury.

"Oh my God! Linn, your throat!" Brad's face had gone white.

Linn glanced at the mirror. A gaping wound in his throat showed where the vampire had bitten him. It hadn't healed the way most wounds would heal for his kind, and that puzzled him. His chest was painted red with his own life. The fluid splattered the counter, bright and red. A brighter shade than human blood, it almost seemed to glow in the electric lights. Like his eyes, which still had a wolfish quality to them.

He looked at his hands. The nails were black. It didn't matter. Brad had seen him fighting the vampire. While he might not know exactly what Linn might be, he knew what he could do. Change his outward form to that of a horse or wolf. Two beasts as black as Linn's own hair, with the same golden eyes he possessed.

"Sorry about the mess," he mumbled, still not fully in control of his tongue.

Brad crossed the space between them in two steps, his arms going around Linn. He hugged Linn tightly, heedless of the blood. "I don't care about the mess. You're hurt!"

Linn grunted a wordless acknowledgment.

"We've got to get the bleeding stopped. What should I do?"

Linn thought about it, but he didn't know what to tell Brad. He'd never bled like this before.

"I think you need a doctor."

"No doctors. Not for me. Not human."

"Then what do I do, Linn? You're going to bleed to death."

Linn thought about it, but his thoughts were slowing. He was having trouble thinking.

He didn't resist when Brad forced him to sit down on the toilet. The man gazed into his eyes. "I don't know what you are, but legends say shape-shifters heal in their animal forms faster than they do in their human ones. Is that true for you?"

Linn gave a slow nod.

"Well, you can't be a horse in this little bathroom, so you'd better turn into the wolf."

Turn into the wolf.

Yes, he could do that.

Linn changed his form and would have fallen off the toilet if Brad hadn't caught him and eased him to the floor.

A gentle hand stroked his head, smoothed the fur of his shoulder. It felt nice, very nice, to have the human petting him. But his throat and flank hurt, so he lay there on the nice cool floor and rested.

The grayness of pain transformed into the blackness of sleep.

Chapter Twelve

Brad had to struggle, but he managed to get the wolf that was Linn into bed. He put towels under the wounds to make sure the blood seeping from them didn't soak the bedding and mattress. He didn't want the bed ruined, and it wasn't his, so he was doubly careful.

He sat listening to the storm, stroking the wolf's fur.

The events of the last few days had changed his life in dramatic ways he wouldn't have believed possible. He'd stepped off that plane in Denver as one version of himself. Worldly in the ways of most people from big cities, totally naive in others.

I've certainly gotten an education in the supernatural since I've been here.

He ruffled the fur on the wolf's shoulder, ran his fingers through it.

This is Linn under my hand. This wolf is the rancher I've been letting fuck me for the last few days. I should be freaking out. I should be running to my car and driving to the airport. I should be fleeing back to the normalcy of my former life.

Normalcy? Victor was part of that, and he turned out to be a vampire.

He gave a short bark of humorless laughter.

And to think I used to worry about such simple things like being mugged or grabbed by homo-haters and beaten up or killed. I never even thought about Victor being a danger to me, and he was the most dangerous being I could have encountered.

Vampires and shape-shifters are real. I wonder, if they're real, what other bogeymen and legendary things exist? Mummies? Witches? God, I just don't

know. For that matter, I'm not sure I want to know which ones exist and which are just the stuff of imagination.

Until he'd come to this place, he'd thought all supernatural beings were the stuff of folklore and imagination.

It would be so easy to leave, put this behind me. Forget any of it happened. Except I don't want to leave Linn. I want... What do I want? I don't even know anymore. I came here to get away from New York and Victor. I came here for some peace and uninterrupted time to write.

Instead, Victor followed me, turned out to be a vampire, and the guy who rented me the get-away-from-it-all cabin turned out to be some kind of shape-shifter.

He rubbed his tired eyes with the hand not petting the wolf and glanced out the window. Lightning painted the woods behind the cabin, turning the shadows darker, lighting the upper branches of the trees.

I really should grab my stuff and get the hell out of here.

He glanced at the wolf lying asleep—perhaps unconscious—on the bed and knew leaving was the last thing he'd do.

This will all be over in twenty-six more days. And the thought of leaving here scares me. My view of the world has changed. I know what lurks in the shadows beyond human perception. It's not just serial killers and muggers anymore. There are vampires and who knows what else? How can I go back to New York? And what about those lunatic hunter people Linn told me about? What if they make me their next target because of Victor or Linn?

He sighed and stared into the rain lashed darkness.

How can I go back to my life the way it was before this?

They were all questions he hadn't the slightest idea how to answer.

The storm raged on for another half hour. It gradually transformed from downpour to a patter of rain, which let up as the first dim rays of the sun colored the thinning clouds.

I'm so frigging tired it's not funny.

Brad lay down beside Linn and closed his eyes. He'd barely dozed off when he felt something beside him move.

He opened his eyes to find Linn—human-appearing Linn—gazing at him.

Brad sat up and touched the man's throat. No trace of the terrible injury remained. “You're okay?”

“Okay. Tired.”

Speech seemed difficult for Linn, so Brad pulled the covers over his shape-shifting lover. “Sleep.”

“Roy 'n' Joe be here soon.”

Brad frowned. He hadn't thought about that. “What can I do?”

“Coffee?”

The word came out so plaintive, Brad had to smile. “All right, Linn. I'll make you some coffee. Breakfast too.”

“Okay.”

He smoothed the dark hair from Linn's sleepy gold eyes and hurried out to the kitchen to make coffee and some breakfast for his knight in black fur.

Brad had seen some terrible, frightening, horrific things since he'd arrived. And yet he found himself taking it in stride as the light of dawn brightened in the windows. The events were a little surreal, but other than that, it was as if nothing odd had happened. He was making coffee and breakfast for Linn as if it were any other day.

But it wasn't any other day. Far from it.

Victor Augustine, the vampire who'd wanted to do something terrible to him, was dead. And Linn, the other not-human creature he'd been letting fuck him, had killed Victor.

All in all, strange or not, terrifying or not, with the passing of the storm and the night, Brad felt really good. Maybe it had something to do with being

free of Victor's influence. After the way Victor had tried to force him to open the door, he was fairly sure Victor expected him to obey. What he knew about vampires—which admittedly came from a few movies he'd seen—said they could control their victims.

Maybe his feeling of everything being okay had something to do with Linn.

He didn't know. What mattered to him was the sense of well-being that filled him the way the sunlight was beginning to fill the almost cloudless sky.

Or maybe the simple act of making breakfast for the *man* who'd fought to save him was a key to his mood.

And maybe it goes deeper than daylight or making breakfast for Linn.

He had *feelings* for the rancher. But he wasn't ready to stare those emotions in the face.

Not yet anyway.

He got the coffee going and quickly melted some margarine in a skillet. He got down a bowl and was in the process of scrambling eggs when Linn entered the kitchen.

"I thought you were resting."

"Smelled the coffee," Linn remarked as he took a seat at the kitchen table.

He was stark naked, and Brad took a long, appreciative look at the man before he poured the eggs into the skillet.

"I don't have any clothes here. I..." Linn sighed, and Brad turned to glance at him, seeing the frown on Linn's face.

"You don't want to go up to the house to get any in case the guys are here."

"Yeah."

"Wear some of mine. They'll fit."

"Okay." Linn got up.

"You can get dressed after we eat."

Linn favored Brad with a slow, knowing smile. "Not really fair. You're dressed."

Brad dropped his pants to the floor. "Now we're on even ground." He turned to stir the eggs and felt strong arms wrap around his waist. Warm lips brushed the side of his neck. The thing that got his attention was the hard rod of flesh pressed to his ass.

He turned the burner off and felt the tickle of Linn's chuckle on the nape of his neck.

"I'd like to remind you that you nearly bled to death last night."

"Shhh. Don't worry about me. I want you to enjoy this."

Linn turned him around, sank to his knees, and took Brad's cock into his mouth.

Brad gasped at the sensation. The intense feel of a firm tongue pressed and swirled over the head of his cock almost made him lose his balance and fall against the hot stove.

"Maybe we should take this to the bedroom before I wind up with a toasted behind."

"Good plan," Linn agreed. Laughing, he swept Brad up in his arms.

"Shit, put me down!" Brad commanded. "You're going to strain something."

Linn simply laughed again, but he did put Brad down...after they reached the bed.

"Do you have a cell phone?" Linn asked.

"Sure. Why?"

Linn patted him on the ass. "I'm going to tell Roy to go on in the house and make the coffee when he gets here."

"Won't they wonder why you're back here?"

Linn shook his head. "I'll tell them I'm looking over some storm damage. A tree came down in the woods last night. I always look fallen trees over to see if they're firewood or can be used for furniture."

"Makes a good excuse. But what about the fact you'll be in my clothes?"

Linn shrugged. "If you've got jeans and a T-shirt I can wear, I doubt they'll even notice the clothes aren't mine."

"Well, if you're sure. I mean, you were the one worrying about them noticing you coming back to the house from here the other day."

"Yeah, I was, but now"—Linn smiled and got onto the bed with him—"I don't really care if they figure out I'm gay."

Brad went and got his cell phone out of the room he'd been using as his office and handed it to Linn.

The rancher made a quick call, informing Roy he'd be back late and telling him to go ahead and make the coffee and that he'd be back to the house in an hour or so. Linn gave the phone back, and Brad put it down on the bedside table.

Grinning, Linn pulled Brad into his arms. "Now where were we?"

"I think we were right about here," Brad replied and set his mouth to Linn's.

They kissed, touched, hands moving over firm flesh, caressing warm skin. Passions awakened, hands stroked hard flesh. Brad kissed his way down Linn's body, took the head of Linn's cock into his mouth, and sucked. Linn's groan of pleasure reached into Brad, touched something deep inside him, ignited the desire he felt for the other man, and shed light on some other emotion he refused to examine. Refused to consider. They barely knew one another. They were strangers in a world transformed from the safety of Brad's former life to this new and dangerous one of vampires, shape-shifters, and the reality of supernatural beings.

What mattered was the man he sought to pleasure. The lover he'd found when and where he'd least expected it.

He took Linn's cock deep into his throat. The sounds Linn made, the way he caressed Brad, touched him in appreciation of his efforts, spurred Brad on to greater efforts. His tongue swept over the head of the tasty flesh in his mouth, and little droplets of flavorful precum made him want more. He gripped Linn's hips and sucked vigorously.

"Going to come," Linn warned.

Brad bobbed his head faster, urging Linn toward climax.

The cock in his mouth spasmed. Salty-sweet fluid filled Brad's mouth. He swallowed and greedily lapped every drop of cum off the dick between his lips.

Linn welcomed Brad into his embrace when the author finally released his cock. He kissed Brad, tasting his semen on Brad's lips.

He's become my lover, and not just in the physical sense of the word, but with the emotions inherent in the word. I barely know him, yet I risked my own life to protect him from Victor. And the thought of him leaving at the end of the month is something I don't even want to face. He'll drive away, fly back to New York, and that will be the end of this.

I don't want it to end.

He held Brad tight, wishing he could convey his need for the author to remain by touch alone. Hoping the other man was forming the same sort of attachment to him as he'd developed for Brad. And knowing what a fool he was for thinking something like that could happen.

Bradford Thorne was a big city guy. An author with strong ties to New York and the publishing world centered there. Brad would never leave the Big Apple for him, a view of the mountains, and a bunch of horses, no matter how hot the sex was between them.

Not that he could blame the man. He wouldn't find it easy to walk away from what he'd built here with the ranch. One didn't throw away his life and career for sex.

At least, Linn couldn't imagine doing that for anyone.

Except Brad because, much as it shocked him to admit it even to himself, he loved Brad. Loved him the way he said he'd never love anyone again.

That was a long time ago. Hearts can heal. Even those of my kind.

Linn ended the kiss. He gazed into Brad's rich brown eyes. "Now what should I do with you?" he asked.

Brad's hand closed around his cock, stroking the flesh, turning the flaccid length hard with the promise of other pleasures to be had. Linn smiled. "If I'd known sci-fi authors were so naughty, I'd have rented to more of them."

"I'm glad you didn't," Brad murmured as he kissed the side of Linn's neck. Lips brushed over Linn's stubbled jaw. Warm breath tickled his skin. Linn closed his eyes, letting Brad do as he would. Taking pleasure from the firm clasp of Brad's hand on his dick, the feel of the other man's kisses on his throat, shoulders, and chest.

This wasn't simply sex meant to slake lust; it was beginning to feel like the touch of someone who loved him.

Linn knew he was imagining it. He had to be. The author had no emotional attachment to him.

Or does he?

It wasn't possible. And yet the gentle kisses, the way Brad sought to give him pleasure without apparent regard for his own needs could signal a growing emotional tie.

Is that what I really want?

And within his own soul, he knew the answer to that was a resounding *yes*.

Brad urged Linn onto his back, and he complied. Brad grabbed a condom from the bedside table, tore open the package, and unrolled it over Linn's cock.

"That time, is it?" Linn asked.

"Yes," Brad agreed as he moved to crouch over Linn. The author smirked and said, "I'm saving a horse."

Linn groaned as his cock slid into Brad. The heat and tightness of the other man always felt like a welcome home. He took one of Brad's hands in each of his to help steady him as he began to move up and down on Linn's length. Brad's butt collided with Linn's pelvis, and the weight of Brad's balls bounced onto Linn's groin.

He'd had other men ride him, but it had been quite a long time ago. Linn discovered—or perhaps rediscovered—how much he liked the feel of another man on top of him, riding the hard rod of his cock.

They couldn't kiss in this position, not easily, but Linn did get to watch the way Brad's expression went from intent desire to wanton passion. Brad's eyes closed, and he moaned a constant hymn to pleasure as he drew closer to completion with every stroke of Linn's cock inside him.

Linn moved, bending his knees upward, planting his feet on the bed. He gripped Brad's hips, and the two of them matched pace easily, Brad's downward motion meeting Linn's upward thrust. Linn groaned and held tightly to Brad's hips as they fucked. His fingernails were black, and the power of the transformation simmered beneath his skin. But he wouldn't change. He was with the man he loved.

Brad reached between them to grip his cock, but Linn let go of Brad with his right hand and took hold of Brad's dick. He gripped it, stroking it fast and rough.

"Going to come," Brad gasped out.

Linn gave a breathless laugh.

"God, Linn, oh God," Brad cried out, back arching, his cock swelling and then erupting in a spatter of creamy fluid that fell on Linn's belly.

Linn's balls tightened, and his dick thrummed as he reached orgasm.

Brad's eyes opened, and Linn, lost in the haze of his own climax, thought he saw them change from brown to a warmer, richer shade, like the loam of an old forest floor. He stared, saw gently pointed ears, the stark curve of a more finely made cheekbone.

Linn blinked, and the strange appearance of his lover vanished.

What did I see? Did I imagine it? Was it a trick of the light or...something else entirely?

Brad collapsed on top of him, spent, relaxed.

Linn inhaled. Under the human's scent and the sharp tang of sex, he found the sweet fragrance of wild violets. Of green growing things and sun-warmed earth.

Linn pushed Brad off himself, sat up, and stared.

A ray of sunlight caressed Brad's cheek. A cheek the color of new ivory where the sun touched it.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Linn managed to get the word out through the thickness of his tongue and the confusion rampaging through his mind.

It can't be, and yet...

He touched Brad's cheek, felt skin soft as rose petals to the touch. He lowered his head and breathed in the heady odor of male and greenery. The scent awakened feelings and emotions Linn could no longer name. Parts of himself he'd long forgotten.

Parts not of the Mortal Realm.

Thorne is a fae name.

A cloud passed in front of the sun. Like a switch being thrown, what Linn had seen, had smelled on Brad, vanished. He was human again. Mortal.

And yet Linn knew what he'd seen, what he'd smelled coming from the author's skin, seeping from his very pores. For that moment in time, he'd been in bed with a man of the Summer Country.

Brad's hand closed around his and pulled it close so he could look at the nails. "They're not fingernails, but they aren't wolves' claws either."

"They're in between human, wolf, and stallion, right at the edge of changing."

Brad smiled at him and kissed the back of the hand he was holding. "Will you tell me what you are now?"

"I'm a puca, a fae-born shifter. We have three forms. I can be a black stallion or a black wolf, or I can look like one of the fae. To appear human I have to employ magic." Linn lay down beside Brad.

"How old are you?" Brad asked. "You don't have to answer that if you really don't want to."

Linn chuckled. "No, that's all right. I'll tell you." Linn slid an arm under Brad's head, and when his lover turned to rest his cheek on Linn's chest, Brad automatically snuggled close.

"I was born in Ireland so long ago, I don't even remember what the mortals called the year. I only recall that there were still practitioners of the old religion that existed before the priests of the crucified son of God came to our land."

"Holy shit..." Brad whispered, eyes wide in surprise.

A faint trace of sweetness clung to the man's hair and skin, and Linn pulled Brad closer. *I wish the magic hadn't faded. I wish it would come back and transform him. But the blood must be so thin, it won't return on its own. Not unless I do something to awaken Brad fully to what he could be. And I can't do that. Not without his consent.*

Chapter Thirteen

Brad sighed. "Much as I'm enjoying lying here with you, Linn, we've both got work to tackle."

"Unfortunate but true," his lover agreed.

Linn gave him a kiss and pulled away.

Brad realized, despite his words, he really didn't want Linn to leave. "How about breakfast?"

Linn shook his head. "I wanted to stay, but I'd better get up to the house. The guys are there, and I *do* have a ranch to run. Besides, I need to see what Victor did to the stable in the light of day. He tried to set it on fire, but I think the only thing that burned was the paint on the wall and a few spare fence rails we had piled up outside."

"Will you be back later?"

Linn tossed the used condom into the trash. "You can count on it."

"Meatloaf and potatoes for dinner?"

Linn grinned. "Nothing like sex and ranch work to make a man hungry." Linn leaned close to him and gave him a kiss that promised another night of passion. Brad moaned and wrapped his arms around Linn, keeping him there for a longer kiss than the rancher might have intended.

"You're okay with last night?" Linn asked when the kiss ended.

"Yes."

"You sure?"

Brad nodded. "Absolutely."

“Good. Now where are those clothes you said I could use?”

Brad got a pair of jeans and a T-shirt out of his closet and watched Linn as he dressed. *That man—puca—is one hot son of a bitch. And damn it, when this vacation is over, I won't want to leave. And he's not likely to want me to stay.*

He walked Linn to the door. “Aren't they going to wonder about you being barefoot?”

“Probably won't even see me until I come out of the house in my own clothes and a pair of boots. If I know those two, they've had their coffee and have gotten to work already.” Linn gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and headed out, leaving Brad to deal with the memories of a stormy night, a vampire, and the revelation that Linn was an impossibly old fae shifter he'd had the poor sense to fall in love with.

* * * * *

Despite the strangeness of the night, a lack of sleep—and probably because of morning sex—Brad hadn't been able to sleep, so he'd actually worked on his book. By five that evening he'd completed another chapter and a half and called it a day. Brad went to the kitchen and got out the leftovers to heat up.

The meal was almost ready when he heard a knock at the door and went to let Linn in.

Wonder why he didn't use his key?

He opened the door and frowned. There wasn't anyone at the door.

There wasn't a rose or a scattering of petals on the porch either, for which Brad was grateful.

Frowning, Brad glanced around, wondering what he'd heard.

Wishful thinking. I just want Linn here, so I'm hearing someone at the door.

He shut the door and returned to the kitchen. He picked up the box of potato flakes and was about to pour them into the liquid in the pot when he heard another knock at the door.

Brad went to answer it with the same result as last time. There was no sign of anyone on the porch or in the meadow.

"What the hell?" he muttered and went to the kitchen. This time he didn't even get the box of potato flakes picked up before another knock sounded from the door.

"Linn, if that's you, come in. If it's not Linn, go the hell away."

He heard the door open and close.

"Linn?"

No answer.

He put the box down and peered into the living room.

A slim man with long blond hair that fell nearly to his waist stood there gazing at him with eyes the color of evergreen needles. The man was wearing the strangest clothes, like something from a RenFair, complete with green tights and a tunic with leaf-shaped cloth things dangling from the bottom hem. The tips of his ears peeked out through the fall of his hair.

"Who are you?"

Instead of answering, the blond man vanished in a flicker of light. The room abruptly smelled of roses and lavender, green growing things, and warm summer rain.

The sound of sizzling and a burning smell broke Brad's incredulous stare, and he bolted to the kitchen to find the milk for the potatoes boiling over.

"Damn it." He grabbed the pot and lifted it off the burner to let the contents cool before putting it back down on the stove. He stirred the flakes into the steaming liquid, and as he stirred, he mused over what he'd seen.

I can't figure out what the hell I just saw. I mean...what the hell is happening around here? I thought the crazy stuff would be over with now that Victor's gone. I see I was wrong.

Could he be a friend of Linn's, or is my mind turning to mush from the weirdness? Do people go crazy from being exposed to supernatural stuff?

A loud knocking at the door sent Brad at a run for it, determined to find out who the guy in the weird clothes was.

He grabbed the door and flung it open to find Linn standing there, a six-pack of beer in one hand and a store-bought chocolate cake in the other. "I went to town to get Dingbat from the vet's office, so I got this."

Brad nodded, peering over Linn's shoulder to see if the blond in the freaky clothes was outside.

"You okay?"

"No," Brad replied truthfully as he stepped aside so Linn could come in. He took the cake and followed Linn into the kitchen.

"What's wrong?" Linn asked.

"I saw...something weird a few minutes before you got here." He put the cake down and stood there, staring at Linn.

"What did you see?"

"A blond guy in RenFair clothes let himself into the living room, and then when I saw him, he vanished."

Linn stared at him as if he'd grown a second head.

"You...saw..." Linn sat down abruptly on one of the kitchen chairs.

"What is it? You've gone pale, Linn. Are you okay?"

Linn nodded. "We're going to have to talk."

Brad turned off the food on the stove and shut off the oven. He sat down on a kitchen chair and said, "Okay, let's talk. What did I see that's got you freaking out?"

"Well, you didn't say if he had pointed ears or not, but you may have seen one of the Knights of the Summer Country."

Brad blinked, stared. "The what of the where?"

"The Summer Country is one of the fae realms. It's probably where one of your distant ancestors came from."

Brad's mind went quiet, nothing going on inside but a soft hum, like a car radio not set to a channel. After a couple of minutes, he managed to say, "You're saying I'm part fairy?"

Linn snorted at that. "Well, considering—"

Brad shook his head. "If you're going to point out I'm gay, which makes me a 'fairy' in some people's eyes, don't, okay? I'm serious here."

"Sorry," Linn said. "Being serious, it means you're part fae. The blood is very weak, but it's there."

"So why didn't I ever see this Summer Country guy before?"

"Something has to happen to awaken the fae blood when it's diluted as much as yours must be."

"Victor?"

Linn shrugged. "Maybe."

"You?"

"Probably," Linn admitted. Brad appreciated his honesty, but he wasn't sure he was ready to hear any more of what Linn had to say. And yet going around in the dark about what he was could be harmful too. He opted for education rather than ignorance.

Brad sighed again. "So what do we do about that?"

"Nothing or something. It's up to you."

"And if we do nothing?"

"You might never see him again, or you might see him here a few times again before you leave."

"Why did he come here at all?"

"He's letting you know what you are and that you have a choice, is my guess."

"And when I go back home?"

"You won't see him there. Cities like New York are anathema to the nobles of the fae realms. Cities are toxic. Even I can't stay in places like New York for very long without getting sick."

"Oh."

Linn reached across the table, took his hand, and lifted it to his lips to place a gentle kiss on his palm. "So what do you want to do?"

"I don't know. I'm not hungry anymore. I'm just...confused."

"We could do something else."

Brad closed his hand around Linn's and headed for the bedroom.

They shed their clothes without speaking. Brad turned to Linn when he was undressed, and the puca took Brad into his arms, holding him close. Warm lips pressed to his, and Brad opened his mouth to let Linn's tongue inside. They kissed, their bodies pressed tightly together, the feel of cock pressed to cock almost more than Brad could bear. After a few short moments, Brad ended their kiss, pulled out of Linn's embrace, and shoved Linn backward onto the bed.

"You'd better get a condom, because we're going to fuck, and we're going to do it now."

Linn's cock twitched, and he grinned. "Bossy, aren't you?"

"Sometimes," Brad agreed as he climbed onto the bed and crawled his way up Linn's body. He lowered his head and took the man's dick into his mouth. He sucked and teased along the underside of the big prick.

"It feels so good when you do that, and if you don't stop, I'm going to come, just so you know."

Brad chuckled, and the vibration wrenched a groan of pleasure from Linn.

"I mean it, Brad. I spent most of the day hard because I couldn't stop thinking about you."

Brad let the man's cock go, met Linn's gaze, and saw honest truth in his eyes. He wasn't joking or teasing him. He had been thinking about Brad all day, which brought a smile to Brad's face.

"Sadly, I was working on my book and trying to decide how to get the Starfire mercenary team to their current assignment," he admitted. "But I did think about you when I was making lunch. My cock got so hard, I thought it was going to pop the zipper in my pants. I almost went to bed to take care of the problem, but I decided I'd rather have you do it when you got here." He grinned and licked his lips, then leaned down to kiss the head of Linn's cock. "And look, here you are."

Linn laughed. "Yep, here I am."

He crawled up the rest of Linn's body and knelt over him, gazing down into Linn's passion-warmed gaze. "I want you, Linn. I want to feel your cock inside me. I want you to fuck me until I scream for mercy."

Linn's eyes widened. "Really?"

Brad nodded. "Really."

Linn's mouth locked over Brad's, and his tongue invaded, conquered, and made Brad a willing captive of pleasure. He surrendered totally to the other man, letting Linn position him for entry. Flat on his back with his legs over Linn's powerful shoulders, Brad gave a low groan of pure enjoyment when Linn's cock slid in, the first stroke slow and deep.

The thick dick moved in and out, each thrust and withdrawal sending powerful sensations through his lower body that rocketed to his brain, where they exploded into bursts of intense pleasure.

Brad stopped thinking. Stopped worrying about what tomorrow might bring. He forgot about yesterday and all the days he'd been Victor's unfulfilled lover. There was only the now. The present and the intense joy of being fucked

by a handsome man who wasn't what he seemed to be on the outside. And that too was fine with Brad, because he'd never felt the intense enjoyment, the same satisfaction he'd experienced with Linn.

Maybe it was the stallion in Linn. Or perhaps it was the wolf or both that made him different. Or maybe it was his own fae blood responding to another of the fae. Whatever the reason, Brad felt things for Linn that no other man had ever awakened. Emotion he'd felt with no one else his entire life.

And the emotion was love.

Brad held tight to Linn, soft cries slipping from his parted lips. Cries Linn silenced with a kiss that sent a burning flare of need through Brad's entire being.

Linn's cock moved faster inside him, and one of the man's hands closed around his cock, stroking vigorously, driving him toward the climax he wanted with the desperation of a man in the desert searching for water.

His body convulsed, shuddered under the merciless lash of need. "Linn!" he screamed out his lover's name as he soared upward on a tide of pleasure so intense, his vision filled with a white glow that faded slowly to red. For a moment, he was lost in a whirlwind of intense pleasure that caught Brad and spun him along like a leaf caught in a stream.

Brad lay on the bed, drawing in each gasping breath as his body and mind reconnected. Linn lay beside him, their sweat-soaked bodies touching, the heat from their flesh slowly dissipating into the cool air.

"That was—"

"Incredible," Linn finished his sentence, the word slurred and hard to understand.

"Hell yes," Brad agreed, taking his lover's hand in his own and holding it tight. Linn's fingers squeezed back.

For a while they lay still and silent, letting their bodies recover.

Finally, Brad said, "So how did you become a puca?"

Time to see if he's ready for the rest of what I have to tell him. I have to take it easy, go slow and not push him into anything. But damn, this isn't going to be easy for either of us. I want him so much, I love him so much, I don't know what I'll do if he decides to go back to New York and his old life.

But that wasn't true either. He'd mourn the loss, maybe to the point of... But no, he wouldn't think about that possibility. He would give Brad a chance to choose his future.

And Linn would live—or not—with that decision.

“Unlike vampires, which are made by the exchange of blood, puca are born as we are, like elves and fairies.”

“Was that knight I saw an elf?”

Linn nodded. “Yes, he was.”

“And I saw him because I've got fae blood.”

“That's right.”

“And you said that the fae blood could be awakened?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“Most fae have the ability to give some of what we are to certain mortals, on rare occasions.”

“Oh? Why only some? Why don't all mortals qualify?”

“A human has to have some fae blood in them. Genes from a fae ancestor is what people would call it these days.”

Brad nodded his understanding. “So what does that mean for us?”

Linn touched Brad's cheek in a gentle caress. “What it means is I can awaken those fae genes in you.”

Linn's lover shook his head. “I don't want that.”

"You don't even know what it would grant you, and you're already refusing?"

"That's right."

Linn rolled onto his back, stared at the ceiling. *That's it, then. He won't step out of the mortal realm into mine. Time for some harsh facts.* "I won't get old, Brad."

"But I will. I'm okay with that, Linn. We're born, and we die; that's what happens to us mortals."

Linn rose up on one elbow, gazed into his lover's dark eyes. He wanted to see the touch of magic warming them forever. Wanted to see the sharpness of a fae man's cheekbones, feel the softness of an elfin lover's skin beneath his hands. If he could have that, he would have everything any fae could want.

If not...then he'd love Brad while he lived.

"It doesn't have to be that way, Brad. Not for you. Not for us."

"I told you living forever isn't something I want."

"How do you *know*? You didn't give it any thought. You heard what I said, but you refused without considering the implications."

His lover sighed. "I did, didn't I?"

"Yes."

Brad remained quiet for a while, his gaze gone distant, lost in thought. Finally, he spoke. "And if we do this, what then? How do I explain the fact I don't age or die to the people who know me? I'm not like you; I'm not some guy raising horses. I'm a fairly well-known author."

Linn didn't need the reminder. "We move somewhere people don't know us. Change our names, do something else."

"Other than the fact I'm not sure I can stop writing—it's a horrible addiction I've never been able to shake—don't you think the government might notice the fact we've been around too long?"

Linn shook his head. "There are ways around that too. There are supernaturals in every branch of government looking out for our kind. Helping us hide."

"Even Victor's kind?"

"For vampire kind, yes. Don't forget Victor was a rogue, Brad. Vampires aren't all killers, just like most humans aren't. Victor broke the rules. That's one of two reasons he had to die."

"So you're telling me most vampires aren't murderers?"

"Yes, that's what I'm telling you."

"So what was your second reason for killing Victor? You said there were two reasons. What's the other one?"

Time to lay it on the table. I don't want to lose him because he's afraid of himself or something ridiculous, like the fear he'll become something terrible like Victor was.

"He also had to die because he was trying to hurt the man I love."

Brad stared at him silently, eyes wide, pupils dilated with the depth of his shock at what Linn had just admitted. Linn could see the slow passage of emotion flowing through Brad. Shock, confusion, disbelief, the gradual realization of what Linn's words meant.

"The man you—" Brad's mouth closed over Linn's. The kiss startled Linn. Left him breathless, his cock hard and aching for the author. He put his arms around Brad and pulled him close, enjoying the feel of the mortal's firm body against him.

Brad ended the kiss and stared into Linn's eyes.

"What?" Linn asked.

"You told me you love me."

Linn grinned. "Yes. Want to hear it again?"

Brad nodded. "I sure do."

"Okay, I love you, Bradford Thorne. How's that?"

Brad smiled. "Perfect. Absolutely perfect." His lips covered Linn's again, and their tongues slid and touched, thrust and parried, tangled together in a heated renewal of their sexual bond, adding the element of the emotional tie of love.

Brad ended the kiss, his dark eyes warmed by desire, his expression one of deep thought. "What would I be if I agreed to your offer?"

"I can't say with one hundred percent accuracy."

"What if it's something bad?"

"I don't think it will be," Linn replied truthfully. "If you had something dark and twisted at the core of your being, I wouldn't feel the pull of a fae lover's bond trying to form."

Brad nodded and lay there quietly for a while. "If I die, will you mourn me?"

Emotion choked Linn, the thought of losing Brad, of the man dying of old age in a few short decades created a pain that made the wolf inside him want to howl and the stallion rail at the hole in his soul such a loss would create.

"We fae," he said, voice tight with the threat of tears, "are creatures of great passion. When we love, the love is so deep, sometimes we fade and become hollow shells of our former selves. Sometimes we simply lie down and die of sorrow if our mate is lost. It almost happened to me, a very long time ago."

Brad's face paled, his arms going around Linn to hold him close. "I didn't know."

Linn stroked his lover's hair and offered him a lopsided smile. "I know that. I also know you're scared of what you might become, but it's nothing to be afraid of. It's part of you already, in your flesh and bones, part of your soul. It's not some horrible thing locked inside you waiting to escape so it can maim and kill those around you."

"You sound so sure."

He gave Brad a reassuring kiss. "Because I am sure. You saw a Knight of the Summer Country, so chances are good you're from the same realm. A lot of my kind come from there, by the way. Do I seem like a killer to you?"

Brad shook his head. "No. But you *did* kill Victor."

"Because I had no other choice. He was a rogue. A vampire living off of emotional torture and death. He made his intention pretty plain the way he stalked you for several days before he moved in to try and make the kill. He wanted to scare you, but he failed, didn't he?"

Brad nodded. "He tried to make me open the door and let him in too, but I realized he couldn't control me."

"That could have been your fae blood allowing you to resist. Few humans could do that."

"I didn't know that either," Brad admitted to him. "Tell me something, Linn."

"What?"

"Why did you save me? Was it because of the sex?" Brad questioned, offering Linn a little smile.

"Yes and no," Linn admitted. "A long time ago, I let a rogue vampire steal someone from me that I loved. I vowed two things that day. First, I vowed I'd never love anyone again. Second, I wouldn't let a rogue vampire hurt anyone if I could prevent it."

Brad caressed Linn's cheek. "So you don't like vampires?"

"Not the rogues. No one likes a rogue of any kind, vampire, shape-shifter, or fae."

"Okay, suppose I agree to awakening my fae side. What happens then?"

"You go on with your life. It won't change who you are, Brad. It's already part of you. It might make your life easier. There were and have always been renowned storytellers among the Summer Country fae. That might explain why

you became an author in the first place. A lot of fae blooded turn to the arts as an outlet for their magic.”

“Magic?”

“Yes, magic. It's inherent in you, like your brown eyes and your beautiful smile.”

Brad kissed him, then asked, “What do we do?”

Linn grinned. “Make love.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“Me too,” Linn agreed as set his lips on Brad's for a gentle kiss that turned fiercely passionate within a few heartbeats. Linn's tongue sparred with Brad's, the thrust and retreat into his lover's mouth a prelude to better things to come. He gripped the sides of Brad's face, deepened the kiss. His cock was hard, aching to be sunk to the root in Brad.

Suddenly, Linn understood the strong attraction that had drawn him to the handsome author the way iron was pulled to a compass stone. Brad's fae blood had reached out to him, and his own fae blood had responded.

Everything made sense. Blood to blood, magic to magic, they were destined for one another.

He pulled Brad to his knees, caressing the man's body. His hands ran over firm flesh, caressing along strong shoulders, downward over a powerful back and muscle-sheathed thighs hard as stone. Linn closed his eyes, reached out, and plucked a thread of magic from the Summer Country. He wound it around his fingers and slid them into Brad's tight anus, working the magic inside, sending it deep.

Brad moaned and spread his legs wider. “I don't know what that is, but it feels great.”

Linn smiled and pulled another tendril of power to him, adding it to the first, using it the way the fae did: as lubricant. Magical slickness to ease lovemaking.

"Shit, that's fantastic, whatever it is."

"It's magic," Linn explained.

"No, seriously, what is it you're using?" Brad asked and turned to look as Linn reached out and drew another sparkling thread of magic out of the Summer Country.

Brad stared. "You weren't joking, were you?"

"No." He wrapped the magic around his fingers and sank them into Brad. The glittery stuff on them flowed into Brad's body, and the mortal moaned.

Satisfied there was enough Summer Country magic inside Brad, Linn positioned his cock at the opening of his lover's body and thrust his dick into the warm hole. Magic wrapped around his dick, and he shuddered and moaned with the powerful sensation he hadn't felt in a dozen human generations.

"It's been so long since I had someone to love," Linn murmured as he pulled partway out of Brad, then slammed his cock home. He'd relished the feel of Brad before, but with the man filled with magic and the power of Brad's fae blood beginning to awaken, the sensation intensified.

"Fuck me, Linn."

Linn needed no further encouragement. He drove his erection into Brad, letting the power of fae passion take over, letting it rule him for the first time in a countless passage of dreary years. Years he'd existed but barely lived.

A warm glow like sunlight surrounded them. The scent of violets, growing things, and rich soil filled the room. Brad cried out, a shimmer of light passing across his skin, and Linn gripped his lover by the hips and let himself go.

The cold that filled Linn's bones, a cold he'd stopped feeling long ago, drained away, the pall of loss vanishing in the warmth of new love. He moved to the beat of his lover's heart, rejoicing in the feel of skin that lost the coarseness of human skin, the hairiness of mortal flesh. He watched as Brad transformed from human to an elf born of the Summer Country. His hair lightening to a golden bronze, skin paling to the soft ivory color of the seelie fae.

“Beautiful,” he gasped, eyes locked on his lover. Linn's hips pistoned faster and faster, and the glow of the Summer Country sun filled the room through the hole Linn had made between the mortal and fae realms.

With a supreme effort, he pulled out of Brad.

“Oh don't stop; please don't stop,” Brad sobbed. “Linn, please.”

Linn turned Brad onto his back, lifted his legs, and pushed himself deep into his lover's body. He wanted to see Brad's face as the magic changed his lover from human to fae.

Brad wrapped his arms around Linn's neck and kissed him. His mouth tasted of sweetness, like honey wine.

Linn groaned as the heady scent and taste of seelie flesh filled his senses. He drove his dick into Brad, the two of them locked together by a desire stronger than flesh and bone. Their very spirits blending in an unbreakable bond of fae love.

Brad's arms tightened around him, the muscles of his anus clamping down on Linn's cock. Feeling how close his lover was, Linn gripped Brad's cock in his fist, feeling the harder flesh and silky skin of an elf against his palm.

Brad tensed, and he cried out as he came, his semen spattering across Linn's hand. A bright flash surrounded them, and Linn's cock surrendered to release as he screamed out, “Brad.”

Shaking, weak from what he'd done, Linn crumpled to the bed beside Brad and let exhaustion take him.

Epilogue

Brad stood on the front porch of the ranch house sipping coffee and watching the sky brighten over the mountain range.

This has been the worst and best vacation of my life. And if I had it to do over again, I would come here, meet Linn, and be rid of Victor all over again.

And best of all, I've found someone to love who loves me. Does life, no matter how long, get any better than this?

Brad gazed on the beauty of the mountains and compared them with the hard lines of the city. Buildings instead of mountains. Concrete and asphalt instead of grass and trees.

He wasn't sure he'd be able to handle New York anymore now that he was fully of the fae. The thought of the city had become distasteful to him.

He smiled as Linn joined him on the porch of the cabin. The puca slipped an arm around him, and Brad leaned into his lover's embrace.

"A man could do worse," he told Linn.

"What?"

"I was just thinking how beautiful it is up here."

"Yeah, it really is, but it can be dangerous too. We get some really bad snowstorms. Bad enough that you wouldn't want to try heading for town, not even with a four-wheel drive."

"Well, that's just an excuse to curl up by the fire, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Linn agreed.

"So what did Roy and Joe have to say about us?"

“Not much. Joe sort of shrugged, and Roy said he hoped I'm happy.”

“Are you?”

“Happy? I guess so. I'm just not looking forward to you leaving.”

“I'm not looking forward to going back there either.”

Linn held him close. “I'm sure we'll figure something out.”

“You could sell the ranch, but no, that's not right. You've put too much effort into your horses, and you wouldn't like New York.”

“Yeah, I have put a lot of work into the ranch, but to be with you, I'd give it up in a heartbeat.”

Brad sighed. “New York is close to my publisher and my agent, but I can write from anywhere.”

Linn gripped his shoulders and turned him so they were eye to eye. “What are you saying?”

Brad smiled. “I don't own the place where I live in New York. It will cost me a penalty, but I can break the lease.”

Linn's mouth curled up in a hesitant smile. “Meaning?”

“Well, if you'll have me, I could move to Colorado. Maybe live here with you?”

The hesitant smile broadened into one of Linn's grins. “I'd like that.”

Brad put his arms around Linn. “Then that's what I'll do.”

Linn grabbed Brad around the waist, lifted him off his feet, and spun him around. “You've made me the happiest puca alive.”

“Well, then, I'm the happiest elf alive,” Brad stated.

A tingle went through Brad, and he and Linn both turned to see the Knight of the Summer Country standing at the edge of the woods. The knight smiled, raised his hand in farewell—or perhaps a welcome—and vanished in a golden wash of otherworldly sunlight.

Linn hugged him and said, “Welcome home, Brad.”

His lover's mouth closed over his, and Brad returned the kiss, reveling in the knowledge that his life was complete for as long as they lived, which would be a very long time.

THE END

Other Loose Id® Titles by Michael Barnette

Dominion
Queen of Carnage

Michael Barnette

Michael Barnette has been nominated three times for the Gaylactic Spectrum Award, the first time in 2003 for his short story *Zoner*, which was the first piece of erotica he ever wrote. *Zoner* was featured in the Lambda Award Finalist anthology *Wired Hard #3* from Circlet Press.

Once a resident of Coconut Grove and South Beach in Florida, Michael relocated to Georgia, where there were fewer gunshots and yard-to-yard searches for suspects to disturb the writing muses. He has since moved on and now lives in a very small town in the Midwest.