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# MATING SEASON

Dear Editor Book Three

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Published by Blushing Books  
An Imprint of  
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.  
A Virginia Corporation  
977 Seminole Trail #233  
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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eBook ISBN: 978-1-64563-706-6  
Print ISBN: 978-1-64563-707-3  
Audio ISBN: 978-1-64563-708-0

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Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

*Dedicated to the fine writers of Use Your Words writing group at the Inner Truth Project in Port St. Lucie, Florida, and in memory of my mother, who would have said a book like this should come in a brown paper bag.*

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## Note from the Author

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, events, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination. A few locations in *Mating Season* are real; others are made up. Resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental, but the author sincerely hopes that all of us find the kind of love and happiness that is possible. *It's never too late!*

## A New Beginning

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**K**ristina Edwards stretched from her twelve-hour drive and twisted her long ponytail into a big knot, in preparation for the tough job ahead. What she really wanted was a hot shower, a glass of wine, and to sleep until noon the next day. *That's not happening*, she thought ruefully. *Way too much to do.*

As she opened the back of her SUV, she sighed. Even after a considerable amount of throwing out, giving away, and selling on Craigslist, the car was packed to the gills, as her sister Layla would say. She wished Layla could be there to help her unpack, but she had a relatively new baby to look after. Born prematurely, just before Christmas, her precious niece's name was fitting, Angela, their little angel. Still, Kristina missed the help. *That wasn't the best timing, big sister*, she thought wryly. As if anyone had foreseen this big a move.

She'd spent her Christmas break helping Layla and her husband Keith with the new baby. They had stopped just shy of actual prying, but they'd known something wasn't right with Kristina. She was different, both in personality and appearance. She hadn't told them, but the confusion and surprise in their faces

when they saw her—just thinking about it brought tears to her eyes. She knew then that she had to get help, had to make some changes.

As soon as she was back at her Arizona apartment in January, she had done two things: looked for a therapist, and applied for a new job. Her therapist, Elizabeth, had been a godsend, encouraging a move but cautioning her to take things slowly—the next school year would be better than a sudden change, especially when therapy was going well.

On a whim, Kristina had sent resumes to a private school in Hawaii, an Indian reservation in Wyoming and a special academy for autistic children in Florida. It was a rural school in the mountains of North Carolina, however, that had hired her on the spot for the upcoming school year at the end of her Skype interview.

"We're very excited about the idea of you joining us," the principal had said. "Our special needs class is small, but with someone like you, someone with fresh ideas, I think we can expand." Humphrey K-12 was progressive in mindset if not in finances, she had said. "We can't match your current salary, but you'd make a huge difference here. We sure would like to give you a chance to fall in love with Humphrey."

Not long after graduation, Kristina had been the recipient of a grant. Her first order of business had been to repay her grandparents for their help with tuition, help they could scarcely afford. But whether she'd forgotten ever applying, had lost track of things while she dealt with her trauma, or what, the funds had been tucked away in the bank largely untouched. Until she had found a therapist. And then needed to move. And then needed a new car. Most of the money was still in the bank, though. She decided that she could afford to make less for as long as she needed. She had accepted the position with excitement.

Principal Clark was an attractive black woman with a sweet smile, gentle manner and infectious laugh. She put Kristina in

touch with a realtor, who found several affordable rentals within a ten-mile radius of the school. Her coworkers at home threw her a surprise going away party in July, and now she was finally here. New town, new job. It had taken several days of driving, diners and cheap motels, but she could already anticipate how good it would feel to sleep in her own bed.

It was late afternoon. The sun had already dipped behind the mountains, taking most of the August heat with it. There was still enough light to enjoy her first actual look at the quaint, unpaved street. What she had paid out west for a tiny studio apartment had more than covered the rent on the cute frame, two-bedroom she'd chosen in Poplar Gap.

As soon as she'd gotten confirmation from Principal Clark, she had looked for a place. There were apartments and houses closer to the school, but she'd sent a deposit for this one as soon as she saw the photographs. Circa 1920, it had been updated and refurbished without stealing its original charm. It even had porches—one in the front and one in the back. Two rocking chairs already sat on the front—one for her, one for a friend. *Not that I have any.* But she could already see herself sitting there grading papers or reading a book, waving to the neighbors. Today would be her first step inside.

"Could you use some help?" a cheerful male voice called in a slow drawl, from around the corner of the house. Kristina was pleased that she only jumped inside a *little* bit. "I live behind you, saw your headlights." A man in his sixties, salt and pepper hair framing a smiling milk chocolate face, stepped into the narrow side yard. "Name's Chip. Chip Murphy."

As Chip approached, she caught a strong aroma of hickory smoke. Instinctively, she took a deep breath. The smell had an instant calming effect on her.

"Yeah, I was smokin' a turkey. Just took it out, too. We get this here car unloaded, I'll bring you'uns some dinner." Without

waiting for permission, the man pulled out a box and headed for the front door. "Is it open?"

"Not yet, um, Mr. Murphy. Just set it on the porch. And thank you! I'll be right there." As Kristina followed with another box and the key, she pushed down intruding thoughts connected to every episode of crime TV that involved helpful strangers. This was rural North Carolina, after all. And he was a neighbor, apparently. *Might as well get to know him now. You'uns. As opposed to y'all?* She marveled a little at her frame of mind. A year ago, she wouldn't have spoken to a stranger. *You've come a long way*, she congratulated herself. *Both literally and figuratively.*

Kristina opened the door and flipped on the nearest light switch, drawing in a quick breath. "Isn't it adorable?" The original wood floor of the modest living room was polished to perfection. Bead board walls held a fresh coat of white paint. Someone had even left a vase of fresh flowers on the mantle of the fireplace. For the first time in years, Kristina felt she was home.

"Adorable!" Chip snorted. "It was me who spiffed the place up, and let me tell you, it wasn't adorable till I did! Last renters were real slobs. Didn't deserve anything this nice."

Kristina laughed gaily. "Well, you did a fine job, Mr. Murphy. I love it."

The man muttered loudly all the way back to the car for another load. "Mr. Murphy. I declare. Makes me sound like an old man." Passing her on his way back to the house, he said, "Chip'll do just fine, little lady. And your name is? 'Round these parts, we like to be on whatcha call a 'first name basis'."

Kristina giggled again. Five minutes, and he had already put her fears and misgivings to flight. "I'm Kristina," she called. "Or Kris. Or Tina! Yes! New house, new state—why not a new identity too? I'll be Tina from now on. And you're the first person to know."

Chip was already back for another box, obviously used to hard work. "Well, I'm honored. Tina it is."



"Is Chip short for Charles?" the newly-designated Tina asked, a little out of breath under the weight of a box of dishes.

"Let me get that," he said. "Kitchen, right? No, not Charles, Richard. Boys back in the day called me Cow Chip when I was a young'un, 'cause we had a farm in the sand hills outside Billy Creek. The Chip stuck. Cow didn't." He stood in the kitchen and shook his head with a grin. "I was glad of it, too. Richard sounded too formal, and even as a boy, I didn't want to be called Dick."

Tina winced at the sound of his real name, covering it with a laugh. She'd known a Richard before, and he *had* been a colossal Dick. She was ridiculously pleased to be able to call this man Chip. And what a nice introduction to the community! In much less time than she had anticipated, the car was unloaded while she learned and shared snippets of information as she and Chip passed one another with armloads.

Boxes, suitcases and bags were strewn throughout the house. The owner had agreed to rent the house partially furnished so she didn't have to pull a trailer with furniture, but she could tell she'd need to do some shopping. The bare minimum here would get her started, but... Tina stood in one of the bedrooms and frowned, her hands on her hips.

"Something the matter?" Chip asked as the final bags were deposited inside the bedroom door.

Without a word, Tina pointed to the twin bedstead. The mattress had definitely seen better days.

"Yeah, I pulled that out of storage. Wasn't sure what you'd want. Knew you were a single lady, but..."

Tina patted the man on the arm. "This is fine. Really. I've got a mattress cover and everything. Same size bed back home." *And all the size I'll likely ever need.*

Chip clapped his big hands together, rough from years of hard work. "All righty, then. How about I go fetch us some of

that smoked turkey and a couple of cold ones and we sit a spell on the porch?"

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By the time Tina waved goodnight to Chip, she felt like she'd gotten a real education. She watched him amble around the corner of her house with his now-empty cooler and a stack of plates, utensils, and assorted condiments. *He's a talker, no doubt about it.* Observant, too, a student of the human race, as he said. She loved the extra syllables to his speech, the cadence that had to mimic what had been heard in these mountains for hundreds of years.

Sitting in the twilight alone, Tina smiled as she remembered their conversation concerning another new tenant. She'd actually live right next door to her. "Maybe we can help move her in," Chip had said. An older woman, he figured she'd need it.

"Too old for me, from the sound of it," he'd continued, shaking his head sadly. "Damn shame, too. Not that many folks like me around these parts." Chip rubbed a hand down one arm for effect. "Not that I make color a stipulation, understand. But here you are, as pretty as a picture and nice as can be, but too young! Now this lady's coming, and she's too old. I need someone right slap in the middle."

Tina had blushed at the compliment, unseen in the dying light of the day. Not so long ago, she would have never sat with a man like that, alone, especially a man she didn't know well. She would have broken out in a cold sweat, trembling, felt trapped, even on an open porch. Her work with Elizabeth had really paid off.

Chip had been raised in the middle of the state, the son of a struggling farmer and teacher, with many siblings. "It gets hot as blue blazes there. I like the mountains better. We used to come over here on vacation, camp, fish. When I got old enough, I

decided to come here permanently. If it wasn't for Mr. Bill, I might not have stayed."

Tina's face flushed again at the memory. She had visibly flinched at the prefix, which sounded to her ears a throwback to darker days. "*Mister* Bill? Does he actually require you to call him that? Doesn't that sound a bit demeaning?"

Chip had thrown his head back and laughed. "Oh, law. You *aren't* from around here. I'll have to remember to tell him. Demeaning. He'd get a kick out of that. We just do things a little different here. *Anyone* older's likely a Mister or Miss, no matter the race. If you know someone, you use their first names, not their last. Young'uns around these parts call me Mr. Chip." He shrugged. "Maybe it's how we tell who belongs and who doesn't. I don't rightly know. But you just call me Chip. I'm not *that* much older than you."

*Old enough to be my father*, she thought with a sigh. Chip's dog, a beautiful blue pit bull, had joined them at about the third beer, fresh from what was likely an evening of mischief. When she'd asked if he had to have a license, if he worried about Animal Control picking him up, Chip had chuckled again.

"City talk. Everybody here knows Blue, and Blue knows everybody. Fact he isn't growling at *you* is a good thing. I've known him to chase a stranger plumb into the next county."

Tina rocked and closed her eyes, listening to the rush of a breeze through the trees, smelling the mossy air, drinking in the peaceful atmosphere. She looked up and down the little street, a cul-de-sac of sorts. *More like a dead end*. There was a vacant house next door, then another house that Chip said was occupied only during the summer and they'd already packed up. Chip's street was more populated. *Mr. Bill. Good grief*. She wondered how many other local customs she'd get laughed at over. She wasn't going to worry about it. Who could worry about anything with lightning bugs dancing before their eyes?

Finally, she stood up and stretched, luxuriating at the thought

of a long, hot shower, but inside, she stopped at the entrance to the bathroom. Involved in unloading the car, she hadn't noticed every detail. The predominant feature of the bathroom was an old claw-foot bathtub. No showerhead. She'd just have to make do for now. Maybe Chip can help. She smiled as she filled the tub with steaming water. *Bubble bath. Put that on the list. And find out if the landlord would mind adding some plumbing. It's either that or cut your hair.*

Even in her most trying times, Tina's hair was her one glory. After... after everything that had happened, she had gone through a rough spot. She stopped wearing make-up and rarely even washed her hair. She'd become a total mess, inside and out. After counseling with Elizabeth, she understood *why* she'd subconsciously tried to cover up her own beauty. She'd worked through that, thankfully.

Her hair, only trimmed since childhood, hung below her waist. She usually wore it up, tight braids wrapped around her head like a crown or in one long braid down her back. She liked the versatility that long, straight hair afforded, but a shower would definitely make maintenance easier. Tonight, she'd make do with the tub, eager to make up the bed and finally get some rest.

Just as she took off her clothes and was about to step into the deep pool of water, her cell phone rang from the bedroom. Quickly, she pulled a towel from the hamper she'd packed linens in and wrapped it around herself—no curtains up yet. *Maybe I'll use the other room for storage, maybe an office.* "Hello?"

From hundreds of miles away, Layla sighed with relief. "I was getting worried. You *always* call by now to let me know you're okay." A single woman driving cross-country needed to keep communication lines open, she'd cautioned her sister.

"I'm sorry, Lay. I totally forgot with everything. I made it here about, oh, five o'clock, then Chip and I unloaded, and he brought me dinner, and—"

"Chip?"

Tina laughed. "Leave it to you to focus on that. Yes, I met a man. A neighbor, and no, I'm not falling in love with him and getting married." There was nothing to do but provide an in-depth description of her final day on the road and the colorful Mr. Murphy, so Tina walked back into the little bathroom, dropped the towel, and continued the conversation from the tub.

"This Tina business will take some getting used to," Layla said as the sisters said goodnight.

"Feel free to call me Kristina or Kris, whatever you want." Tina giggled. "I just thought it was the perfect time to start fresh."

After she laid the phone on the floor, Tina sank down further into the tub until she was submerged. *Ahhh*. She had wanted a shower, but a long, hot bath had its own glories. She came up for air and leaned her head back against the end of the tub, swirling the water slowly with her hands, running them along her body, up and down her bent legs. She was too tired to shave her legs tonight. *Why bother anyway? No one would notice.*

One hand hesitated. She let it wander where it wanted to go, between her legs. *Find the little button, she thought. Make me feel alive. Make me feel like a woman.*

She experienced no sensation. It wasn't that touching the area was unpleasant. It was no different than touching her leg or arm. It should be different. *Elizabeth said it would take time for the remnants of trauma to heal. I've got plenty of that, anyway.*

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Chip Murphy rocked on his back porch until he saw the last light go out in Tina's house. If Tina didn't hang curtains the next day, he'd be surprised. She'd walked into that back bedroom with nothing on but a towel, quickly switching the light off. Feeling suddenly proprietary, he decided that if she hadn't hung curtains

by noon tomorrow, he'd walk over and see if she needed help. Friendly's one thing, but she needed privacy. A quiet place to just be, away from prying eyes. Mr. Bill had taught him that.

"She sure is purty, isn't she, old boy?" he asked Blue softly, scratching him between the ears then heading for his screen door. "Mr. Bill asked us to be on the look-out for one, and she might do just fine. We'll have to see, won't we? Come on then. Our job's done for the day."