

Reggie could not see or hear that he was being sought out. Fast asleep, he could not know that animal that he wanted as his spiritual guide was steadily following his scent, and heading directly to the cabin.

At fifty feet away, the lion's acute hearing picked up the rhythmic inhale and exhale of the two-leg's breath. At twenty-five feet, the lion's acute night vision could see the rise and fall of the two-leg's chest.

On the ground below the raised cabin, the lion anchored its hindquarters with its tail and lifted its front quarters in one effortless ascension. It reached up and unsheathed its two-inch claws and locked them on the outside lip of the cabin floor. At two feet from the two-leg's face, but on the other side of the screen, the lion's whiskers felt the warmth of his body. Although the lion could have cut through the screen and then through the throat of the two-leg in a single swipe, he did not. The two-leg stirred and the animal left as silently as he came.

Praise for Stalking Los Angeles

“Nothing seems to be going right in Reggie Youngblood’s life...Reggie soon finds his escape in studying mountain lions and his Indian heritage... Read Stalking Los Angeles by Tom Berquist to discover how Reggie falls in love, discovers himself and learns some of life’s most important lessons. Four out of five stars.”

~Litpick.com

“...the storyline was a very original idea... Reggie was likable and easy to relate to. (T)he plot moved along at a nice pace, and it always held my interest. I ... would recommend it to others.”

~Taylor H. Litpick.com

“Reggie is likeable... the epitome of a teenage boy...Berquist employs the use of dual narratives, paralleling Reggie’s journey with the journey of a mountain lion just reaching his maturity. This dual narrative brings (the novel) to the next level. I believe this novel would be something teenage boys ... could really identify with.”

~Shannon A. Los Angeles

“I would recommend this book to teens (who) struggle with who they are and struggling to accept their new surroundings. Stalking Los Angeles shows the perspective of various characters undergoing confusions about life, parents, sexuality, and themselves....(T)his book moved me to try and become more observant of nature and what it has to offer, what it can do to relieve my troubles, and to become more protective of it...Life will turn out ok; there are many bumps, trips, and struggles, but as Reggie proved, most struggles have a better reward at the end and have a great outcome.”

~Mel R. Los Angeles

“Stalking Los Angeles is a coming of age story for nature lovers... (A) heartwarming story of conservation and coming of age in a world that is careless and unkind both to mountain lions and to teenage boys. ...(I)t is a good story in which heroes get to be heroes.

We could use more stories like that.”

~Elizabeth K. Lexington, KY

Stalking Los Angeles

by

Tom Berquist

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Stalking Los Angeles

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Cover Art by www.angelheartdesign.org

Publishing History

First Edition, 2015

Print ISBN 978-0-9721379-5-9

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my wife Ellen, who continues to put up
with my creative needs and cranky ways.

Acknowledgements

I couldn't have written it without the help of my writing teachers,
Children's book writing organizations, critique group partners,
editors and readers. Thanks.

Author note

Although a work of fiction, this book is based mostly in fact. The Los Angeles mountain lions are still struggling in this ever depleting habitat. I have tried to be true to their species and speak from inside their skin. The characters are fictional too, but they represent true conservationists who work hard to protect all our plants and animals. As I have dedicated a portion of sales of my book to wildlife preservation, I hope reading this will inspire you to help.

For a free Discussion Guide see:

www.mountainlionLA.com/DiscussionGuide

Suggested website links: <http://www.samofund.org/santa-monica-mountains-wildlifepreservation/park-connectivity-wildlife-corridor/>
www.mountainlionfoundation.com
www.urbancarnivores.org <http://www.nwf.org/>
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<http://www.sierraclub.org/>

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

When the cub was born, he was not given a name, but instead a scent signature by his family. He smelled like the Lupine flower that bloomed in purple profusion where he was born. Lupine-cub was his scent-name.

One evening when he and his brother and sister were sleeping next to their mother after a warm snack, they felt a sudden jolt. As their mother leaped up into action, they immediately saw a stranger shoot out of a thicket with a savage snarl. Lupine-cub could immediately smell his maleness.

The mountain lion intruder roared and charged, and their mother had just enough time to push her cubs back. She yowled for them to run. They darted away and hid deep in their bramble den, shivering as their mother faced off with the stranger. The branches were too thick, and the cubs could not see, but Lupinecub heard the screams of battle. There were shattering sounds of fangs hitting fangs, claws slashing claws. Then there was silence. A long silence. The cubs huddled and mewed and wanted to help, but stayed hidden as they were taught.

Then there was a shuffling sound, padded feet moving slowly toward them. Then it grew louder, faster. The cubs shivered in panic as they waited for the stranger to pounce on them, but then they picked up a familiar scent. It was their mother. But there was something different to her scent; they smelled her blood. She crashed through the bramble and collapsed in front of her cubs with deep gashes to her head and flanks. The cubs helped to lick her wounds. She nuzzled them and licked their fears.

In time, Lupine-cub also came to fear the two-legged animals. Living in the dense forest high above their cities, the two-legs seldom entered his homeland. Once he came near one of their wide paths and saw them riding inside growling, smoking beasts with four round legs spinning fast. His sister, frightened, ran onto the path and was rammed by the smoking beast. She was thrown high into the air and died before hitting the ground. It was that day Lupine-cub learned to keep the two-legs at a safe

distance. His instincts told him they were not fierce, but what they carried with them made them powerful predators. He'd watch as they took down deer from a great distance with one sharp roar of their long firesticks.

In the valley below the dense forest, a boy named Reggie Youngblood was sitting at the kitchen table with his mother, Carole. Reggie talked into a computer screen.

"Tell you what; when I get back from Iraq," the man said through the jittery Skype connection, "we'll hike our favorite mountain trails."

"Sure, Dad," the boy answered.

"Let's plan a family picnic as soon as you get back," Reggie's mom jumped in, "we can hike up to Ridgeview Rock just like we used to."

While his mom went on planning their picnic and where the best views would be and how they could also visit the Holyfield's, Reggie's mind trailed off to the last time he went hunting with his dad. It was the first and last time he shot a deer. The whole scene flashed by in seconds. He was only twelve then and not too steady with the 30.06 Remington rifle his dad had bought for him.

He hit the ten-point buck in the hindquarters and they watched it fall beyond the Junipers and then struggle to get up. It had been over three years since that day, but what happened next still made Reggie feel like vomiting. As he and his Dad ran to their fallen prey, they saw the hollow-point round had torn a gaping hole past the buck's rib cage and its intestines were hanging out. The buck made gurgling noises and its tongue flapped as it wrenched its head up and down.

Reggie could still hear his dad yelling, 'Quick, put him out of his misery—give him a shot to the head.' But Reggie bent over and threw up. Then his dad, with a disgusted look on his face, proceeded to grab the rifle from him and took care of it.

"SCRRIT!" A noise in the background. The Skype signal began breaking up and Reggie's dad said something like '...only 126 days...go hunting? ...take c ...love....' The audio dies. The video freezes. Blank.

Reggie turned to his mom. "I'm not going hunting. I'm never going hunting again."

Looking concerned, she offered, "I'll try to talk to him about it, but you know how he feels about taking you hunting. He thinks it's what a father is supposed to teach his son."

“I don’t care. I don’t care what he thinks he’s supposed to teach me. He’s already taught me what a man shouldn’t do—you should remember that.”

“I know Reggie,” she said, ending the conversation, “it’s time we both start standing up to him.”

When Lupine-cub grew older, his mother took him hunting, teaching him where to find prey and when and how to best hide before the ambush. He watched carefully as she slowly crawled and froze, crawled and froze, repeating this over and over - stalking closer and closer to their meal. He mimicked her every move, and when she leaped, he’d jump as far and high as he could, paying attention to how she landed on top and brought down their prey. And then they would eat.

One day, she left Lupine-cub. His hunger and training drove him to find his own food: squirrels, raccoons, and finally deer. And when he was almost full-grown, another instinct arose; Lupine-cub felt the ancestral, pulsating urge to find his own mate.

His nostrils flared and twitched when he picked up the sweet scent of a nearby female one evening, and he followed her scent trail with earnest. But before he could get a look at her, he heard her yelping. He charged ahead, no longer worrying about crawling and freezing, but when he finally saw her, he was crushed to see her wrestling with an older, much bigger male.

His instincts told him the older mountain lion could, and would, kill him. But Lupine-cub remained transfixed as he watched the older lion mount her and then lay down to rest. Lupine-cub was unaware that the bigger lion had picked up his scent, until he saw him look in his direction and growl. The old lion made a huge leap at the intruder, just missing catching his rear legs with his huge claws.

The young lion bolted through the grass and bramble and then leaped across a wide ravine. The older lion gave chase, growling and coming at him with murder glowing in his yellow eyes, his fierce screams echoing through the canyon. But Lupine-cub was too fast; the old lion grew tired and stopped the chase; his instincts to mate were stronger and he soon returned to his female.

When Lupine-cub became Lupine-boy, he felt a change in his body and a change in the wind. He didn’t know it, but on one fateful day, he was given a new name by the two-legged animals. It was night when he caught a seductive but foreign scent near

the edge of a meadow. Curious, he slowly crouched toward it, but as soon as his whiskers touched the pungent pile, ‘Snap! Whoosh!’ Something bit his rear leg and held tight.

Lupine-boy roared and reared to face his enemy, but nothing was there but a sharp pain and an invisible tight grip. He struggled to escape, rolling on the ground, dragging his sides in the dirt, but the pain only strengthened. It would not let go. His sharp teeth and strong jaws could not bite through it. He was trapped.

Exhausted, he dropped to his belly and slept until dawn. In the morning, he felt another sharp pain, this time in his hindquarters. Rising to fight on three legs, he saw no enemy; he only saw a feathered thorn sticking out where the pain was. Suddenly, he heard movement all around him, and then he saw the two-legs coming with firesticks. As they grew nearer, they moved slower and slower until they blurred in Lupine-boy’s eyes. His body felt weak and he fell to the ground like a lifeless lump.

When he woke up later, the two-legs were gone. The young lion felt a weight and an itch around his neck. It smelled both of leather and the two-legs, and he couldn’t get it off. Still groggy, he hobbled away as far as he could from the smell of the where the two-legs had handled him.

In the valley below, school buses returned to their parking lots and cars crammed and choked up the roads on their evening commute. Reggie Youngblood heard his mom come home, but didn’t leave his room to greet her.

“You in there, Reggie?” his Mom called.

“I’m here,” he grunted, “But I’m busy.” At least she didn’t knock on my door, he thought with his eyes glued to his laptop, and ask me if I had a good day. But a couple minutes later, his Mom cracked open his door and asked if he had a good day.

“Are hot dogs and beans okay with you?”

Startled, he quickly fumbled to close the web page. Carole saw Reggie slam the laptop closed and stared at the white wall above his bed, looking embarrassed.

“You know Reg, if you were looking at porn, it can give you a warped view of things,” his mom said.

“Whatever,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“Look, honey, I know it’s normal for boys to look at that stuff, but you can easily get the wrong idea on how to treat girls without forming a loving relationship.

"I know; you've told me that before," Reggie said without taking his eyes off the wall. Although he felt she was right, he said, "Hot dogs and beans are fine." As soon as she left, he put on his sweats, went into the living room, and plopped down on the couch. He turned on an old NOVA episode about 'The World of Insects' until he started to itch all over and switched to South Park.

"Dinner's ready!" his Mom called.

Slouching into his chair, Reggie started pushing the hot dog slices around the beans.

"Want ketchup?" she asked. "No, Ma."

"Really? You used to always add ketchup."

Reggie looked up at his mom and asked, "These Wal-mart hot dogs?"

"All beef," she answered, "gluten-free."

"Can't you get those wieners like we used to get up in Crestview? They were pink, not red, and they had skin. They, like, snapped when you bit into them."

"I know Reg," she answered, "but we don't live there anymore."

"Yeah, I know. And it sucks! I feel trapped by all these stupid buildings and freeways."

"I know. I don't like the city either. You know that your dad had to sell the place so we could be okay." She immediately changed her tone: "How was school?"

"Sucked. Like always."

"Any cute girls yet?" she asked.

"Yeah, right Mom, all the girls are attracted to guys like me who look like freaks."

Looking at her son's finely chiseled face, the full lips and the gentle dark eyes framed by long lashes, she said, "You're crazy. You're a very good looking boy, Reggie, and you've got a big, gentle heart... once the girls get to know you..." She raised her hand in the air and snapped her fingers, "It'll happen just like that!"

"Yeah. Sure. Once they see through my hair," he smirked.

"That's who we're looking for!" she said, rubbing the top of his bushy head. "Got any plans for the weekend?"

"Nope."

"You always have a good time with Isaac at the Audubon Center," she suggested.

Reggie shook his head even though he actually already had plans to go to the center with Isaac. "Yeah, at least I'll get a break from that friggin' school, he blurted out, "You know I hate it!"

“You mean the kids?”

“Yeah, the kids. There are some major assholes there.”

“What’s wrong with them?”

“First of all, there’s this Kevin kid who thinks he’s such a cool dude—like he rules the hallways or something.”

“What does he do?”

“He, like, pushes kids into the lockers—kids who aren’t in his group. He tripped Isaac once, which really pissed me off.”

“Did he ever do anything to you?”

“Not really, just called me ‘half-breed’ once.”

“That’s not very nice. I thought the school had all kinds of kids from all kinds of backgrounds?”

“It does, but he saw me talking to this girl...” Then Reggie stopped, knowing that his mom would want to know more about her.

“I just try to ignore him. But whatever. On top of that, most of my classes are really lame.”

Reggie kept swirling the baked bean juice on his plate and pictured Jennifer, a girl in his biology class, who seemed really nice.

“You know how important it is that you get good grades,” his Mom said. “Your dad will be asking this weekend.”

“I know,” he said, keeping his head down, thinking that was the hard part. His dad would probably be asking him about Algebra—the subject that he thought was so important. He could hear him lecture how he had to be good at numbers if he wanted to be a businessman—not a man who worked with his hands and never made enough money. Reggie was actually doing okay in school, but he wasn’t doing it so he could become one of those suits slaving away in a cubicle.

“How’s Algebra coming?” his mom asked.

“Jesus. Mom!” Reggie slammed his fist on the table. “Why do you always take his side—no matter what he says or does?” Seeing his mom’s face wince then fall, Reggie immediately regretted blaming her. She put up with a lot; she even had taken a second job to keep things together.

After a long pause, his mom said, “It’s tough in a new school, but I know you will find yourself. Things will turn around.”

“Sure. Whatever.”

“I’m sorry, honey, but I’ve got to head out to work,” she said, grabbing her keys. She came back to kiss him on the top of his head.

Reggie smiled for the first time in the morning and said,

“Don’t forget the words to the Wal-mart customer cheer!” “Oh, I won’t,” she laughed as she shut the door behind her.

At least I have biology tomorrow, Reggie remembered, as he headed back into his room.

Lupine-boy could not know what that collar around his neck would mean in the world of the two-legs. He was now almost a fully grown mountain lion and had the strong instinct to survive—to run away from danger. But now, Lupine-boy also now sensed an instinctual shove to find his own territory, to take a mate and father his own offspring.

One spring night his instincts pushed him in a new direction. Lupine-boy didn’t perceive that on a high ridge above him, a larger male lion stalked him. Crouched and silent, the big cat waited for the perfect moment to shoot down on his young rival. Finally, the big cat leapt. In mid-air, his jaws and claws sprang open for the kill.

A split second before the big cat almost landed on the young cat’s back to sink his two-inch daggers into his neck, the young cat jumped. The big cat tumbled and snarled, but only got in one good swipe at the young lion’s hindquarters. Lupine-boy took off like a shot.

He sprinted down the canyon, jumped over high junipers and made incredibly sharp evasive turns that the heavier animal couldn’t match. Soon he reached a hill looking down on the wide path that divided his forest homeland with shining dens of the two-legs. He saw and smelled the fast-moving lines of the growling beasts the two-legs rode in.

Death was right behind him, he knew this, but he also knew that it was possible that death faced him below, too. The young cat hesitated feeling the smooth path at his feet and saw two white eyes of one smoking beast roar past him. There. Now. He leapt behind it, running as fast as he could as another beast screeched and almost hit him. He made it half-way across, but a long stone barrier stopped him. He froze.

Lupine-boy could not go back. His heart urged him to leap again into the path of the beasts running in the other direction. A beast’s two red eyes passed by him. He sprinted and leaped to the other side, successfully escaping the smoking beast. Looking up the hill, he saw a tall wire fence. He sprinted along the fence line to gain momentum and leapt. He felt his tail clip the top and he fell hard into a clump of sage brush. There, the mountain lion lay still licking his wounds. He stayed there hidden until next nightfall. Then he would slip out of the shadows.

CHAPTER TWO

Driving on the 101 to Encino, Joe Sartor shook his head remembering his encounter with the new juvenile mountain lion that had just crossed this freeway without becoming road kill. He had only months ago fitted the animal with a tracking collar and had given him a name: P12, for the twelfth puma or mountain lion they captured for their study. I'll have to tell the Biology class about this miracle cat, he thought. As he pulled into the high school parking lot, he wondered if these students would be interested in protecting this nearly endangered species.

Reggie Youngblood was the last student to make it into his seat just as the bell rang. He always waited in the hall to make sure Kevin was already in. Today was guest lecture day, and standing next to Mrs. Horton was a tall man with big shoulders. He was light-skinned, had a pointed jaw and looked a lot like his dad, except for his moustache. He wore a brown sports coat, jeans and dusty black hiking boots.

"Class!" Mrs. Horton announced in her booming voice,

"We have been studying the genetics of fruit flies and how this little organism has been used by laboratory research scientists to understand how gene mutations arise and are passed down from parents to offspring."

Reggie remembered those lessons and thinking how boring and useless it seemed to him. How could anyone decided to become a scientist and spend every day looking through microscopes at little fruit flies?

Mrs. Horton continued: "Today I am pleased to introduce Mr. Joe Sartor, who is a wildlife biologist from the National Park Agency. Mr. Sartor is recognized as a world expert in capturing and studying large carnivores. I want you to pay particular attention to Mr. Sartor's talk when he discusses DNA analysis and how inherited mutations in inbred populations can affect their survival fitness. Now let's please give him a big welcome."

The kids clapped and Reggie wondered how a guy who works in the jungles and forest with wild animals could also be interested in genetics.

“Thank you, Mrs. Horton and class,” Joe began. “Today I want to talk about lions, but not about African lions. The lions I’m talking about don’t live in a pride with other lions and they don’t hunt zebra.” He scooted over and put his hand on a large piece of shaped cardboard sitting on Mrs. Horton’s desk. “This kind of lion I’m referring to is a solitary creature who lives in the shadows and roams the hills at night and is rarely ever seen by humans.”

As Joe slowly unfolded the cardboard cut-out, he continued, “This is our American lion, the powerful, independent, freedom-loving mountain lion.” By this time, he had unfolded the full-body shape of the giant cat way beyond the sides of the desk to reveal the animal’s long, sleek body. Reggie focused intently on the lifesize photo and took in every detail of the lion’s muscular shoulders—paws as big as saucers, sharp front teeth more than two-inches long, and a whiskered face complete with a nasty snarl.

Joe continued, “Some people also call this guy a cougar or sometimes a panther, but it’s the same animal. He is lion and a big cat, and we use all those names for him, but his official scientific name is *Puma concolor*, meaning puma of one color.” Gently stroking the back of the image, Joe described it as “a beautiful warm tan color with white on his chin and belly and dark brown on the tips of his ears and tail.”

Awesome, Reggie thought, I can see why this dude loves this animal. Being a keen observer and lover of animals, Reggie was mesmerized by the picture of the mountain lion. It made him think of the leopard he had seen in the Los Angeles zoo. He remembered how it paced back and forth in between the boring corners of its enclosure like its spirit was broken. He could relate to the animal’s feeling of frustration and isolation; how it felt when his dad would make him stay in his room an entire afternoon for being too wild.

The lights dimmed and the white screen lowered from the ceiling, and just like that Reggie’s attention came back to the class. Photos of mountain lions came on the screen, the big animals running and leaping, and then one dragging a deer by the neck.

Joe said, “The mountain lion grows up to eight feet long and weighs as much as a grown man at 200 pounds. Nature has built him to be the ultimate predator. He can run at 40 miles an hour and leap 20 feet in the air to take down a deer twice the lion’s size. He will often knock his prey down with one blow and then sink his two-inch long retractable claws into the deer’s side so it can’t escape. In the same exact instant, his massive jaws and curved pointed teeth clamp down on the deer’s neck and twists it. The deer dies in seconds.”

“Gross!” one girl gasped.

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