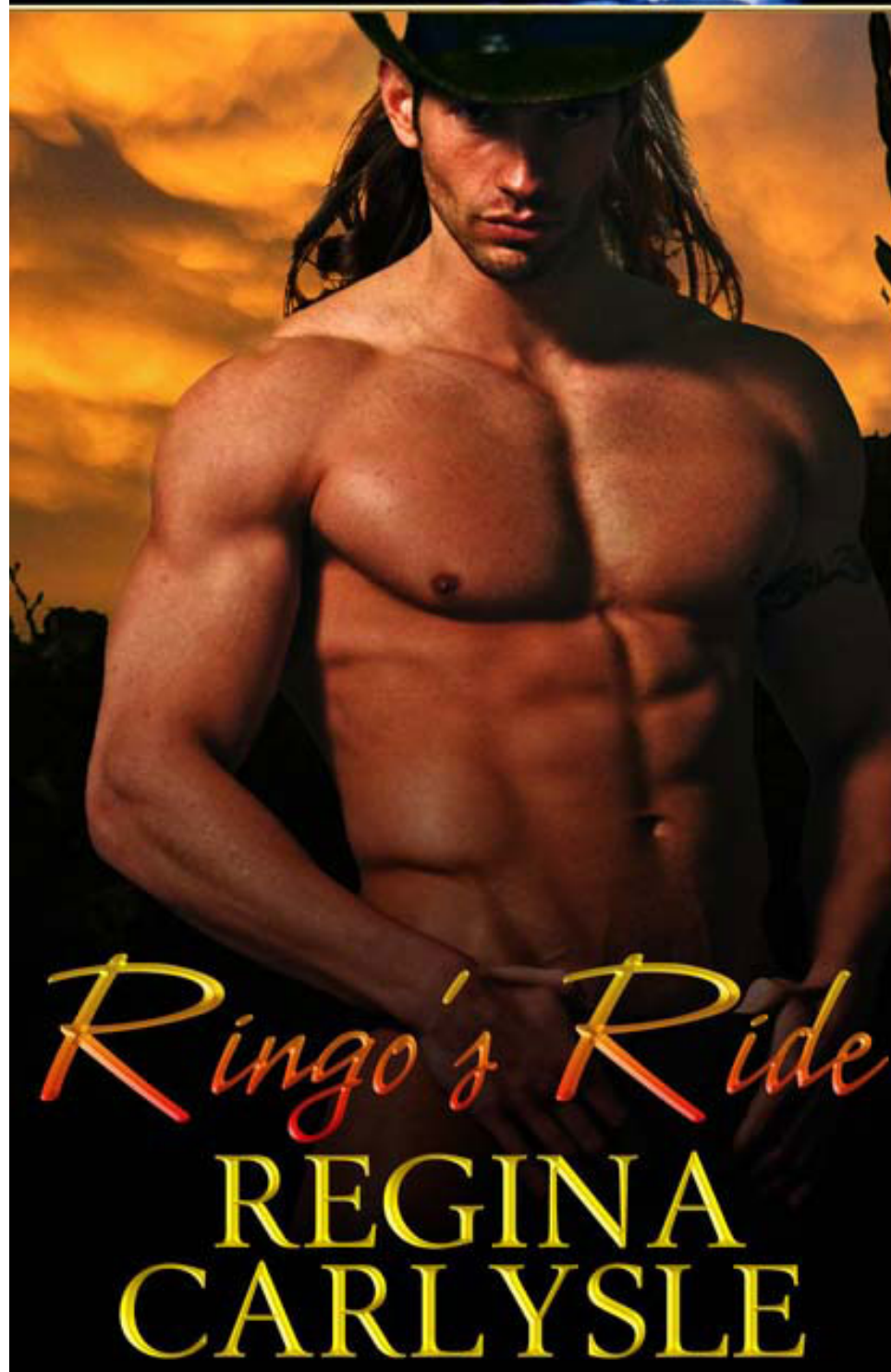


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



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Ringo's Ride

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# ***RINGO'S RIDE***

**Regina Carlisle**

## *Dedication*

To author Fran Lee, who understands the value of supporting her fellow writers.  
You are a doll and I treasure your friendship and generosity.

## **Chapter One**

Ringo Ramone raced through the hot Texas night as if someone had lit a fire under his ass. He dodged rocks and prickly cactus, ignoring the heat that singed the pads of his paws, too furious to notice. Rage beat at him until he practically shook with it. He sniffed the ground in an effort to pick up the trail of the rogue lycans who'd stolen his mate.

His mate!

Fuck!

He'd always suspected Rayne Poteet might be the one but he hadn't wanted that. For years he'd watched her from a distance, drawn to her sweetness, her beauty. He'd slunk around in the shadows, fighting off the feelings that twisted tightly in his chest every time she so much as spoke to him. He wasn't an emotional man and didn't plan on changing for any she-wolf, not even Rayne. Besides, she was too good for the likes of him. He was a motherless son of a rat-bastard traitor and that's all he'd ever be.

The huge black wolf stopped and panted. How much ground had he covered since leaving the ranch house to hunt down the men who'd taken her? Tonight they'd had a barbecue for the town of Cloverfield. It had been a happy time and, Lord knew, he'd seen too few of those in his many years. His alpha Joe McKinnon, and Quinn, the daughter of their former alpha, were celebrating their Consummation Ceremony when it all went down. Like a bunch of raving idiots, the males of the pack had been lured by rogue lycans to the south pasture while others had circled back to the ranch to steal away their unmated females.

Rayne!

She was his predestined mate. He hadn't known it until tonight and then, in one instant of stupidity, she'd been taken before he'd had time to absorb it all. Spotting a

grove of mesquite in the distance, he loped over, shifting as he ran. Naked, dripping with sweat, he leaned against the rough bark and closed his eyes. Ringo couldn't help it. The look on her face tonight as the knowledge of their empathic connection, the proof they were meant to be a mated pair, had gone through him like a blast from a flamethrower. Her pretty, sherry-colored eyes had gone wide as energy sizzled between them.

His cock thickened as he remembered.

Damn his horny ass!

This wasn't the time.

Shifting back into his wolf, he took off again, scenting the air. Off in the distance, he spotted an old line shack at the edge of the ranch property. If worse came to worst, he could bring her to it. It was kept fully stocked with provisions.

Ringo continued on, running endlessly across the empty stretch of prairie. Suddenly, he spotted it. A low campfire was flickering in the predawn darkness, shooting up occasional sparks. Laughter. Male laughter. His heightened senses picked up the sound of Rayne's breathing. It was accelerated.

A truck was parked at the very edge of the meager light and two naked men sat on the ground several yards from where Rayne lay, trussed up like a Christmas turkey. Her clothes were a mess and there were scratches on her legs. Her copper-colored hair was spread across the dusty ground like a pool of sunshine and he got a glimpse of her bare white belly and the tiny red panties she wore.

"What are we gonna do with her? Zavalos must be dead. He hasn't shown up like he was supposed to."

The other lycan stood and, planting his fists on his hips, stared across the fire at Rayne. Ringo lowered his body closer to the ground and moved slowly toward them, listening.

"Something went wrong. I feel it," he said. "Let's load her into the truck and head south. We can't wait out here anymore. It'll be morning soon."

"Please. Let me go," Rayne said.

Ringo's heart thumped then sped in his chest at the sound of her voice. Just hearing it threatened to send him to his knees.

"Can't do that, Red." This from the man who was crouched before the fire. "Our pack is short on unmated females and you'll have to come with us."

"But I-I am," she stammered. "I have a mate."

The lycan who stood stalked toward her and, grabbing her shoulders, jerked her upright and slapped her. The crack of it shredded the quiet.

Red rage clouded Ringo's mind. His fur bristled. They would die this night for trespassing on what was *his*. His snarl of outrage made his prey go still. With death and destruction on his mind, he leaped.

\* \* \* \* \*

The first lycan had thrown her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and run with her into the night to where a truck waited. A second man had bound her hands and feet with duct tape and covered her mouth with it too. Callously they'd tossed her into the bed of the truck and driven off. She heard the cries of the McCafferty sisters and wanted to scream her outrage. They were just girls really, no older than seventeen. No doubt they were being handled in the same sickening manner. A second truck, carrying the girls, went in another direction.

Oh gods!

There was no way in hell she could help them.

Terrified, shaken beyond anything in her experience, she'd lain there as tears leaked from her eyes. All she could see was the smattering of stars overhead. All she could hear was the sound of the truck engine and the wind as it whistled by. Closing her eyes, she prayed for Ringo.

Yes, she was lycan but not yet fully in working order, so to speak. She'd yet to shift and only tonight had it been revealed that Ringo, the lanky, dark wolf with the blacker-than-sin eyes was *hers*.

Hers.

Finally. After all these years of hoping and praying that he was the one who would have an unbreakable psychic connection with her, the wish had come true. He would come for her. She knew it.

They'd barely touched tonight at the barbecue at the Wolf Creek Ranch. Big Joe McKinnon, the pack's new alpha had taken Quinn, his newly consummated mate by the hand. Joy propelled Rayne to her feet as she took a step through the crowd and toward the bandstand where the couple had gone to make an announcement. Suddenly, she brushed against six foot four inches of steely-hard muscle. She smelled the familiar scent of clean, masculine cologne and stared into the black eyes that featured prominently in most of her dreams.

"Ringo," she gasped as his hands reached out to steady her.

"Steady there, darlin'."

He sucked in a breath and so did she. Their eyes connected and held.

Around her the world narrowed dramatically as a low buzz of energy zipped through her system. Instantly her panties were drenched and a ball of lust tightened low in her belly. Her first thought was to press her thighs together to soothe the harsh ache in her pussy. "Wha—"

"Fuck. No. This can't be happening," Ringo murmured huskily. He released her as if burned and shoved his fingers through his thick, black hair. His nostrils flared. His breath whipped in and out of his lungs as if he he'd run a race.

Rayne could do nothing but stare. Ringo's eyes narrowed on her seconds before he grabbed her arm and ushered her toward the kitchen door of the house. His grip was strong but she didn't mind. Even a simple touch from him set her on fire. In the distance she heard shouts of "Happy consummation" from the lycan population of



Cloverfield, Texas. But then she heard nothing because Ringo led her through the door, pressed her against the wall and took her mouth with a hunger she'd never experienced before. Those lips, that to others might seem cruel, softened over hers and then he nipped her bottom lip. "This can't be happening. It can't be *you*."

He regretted her. He didn't want her.

Ringo Ramone couldn't be plainer about his feelings but it didn't keep her from wanting him. He inhaled as if breathing her in then plunged his tongue deep. Energy swirled around them, through them and hung heavily in the air as he tasted her, drew on her tongue and sipped every breath she exhaled. The low moan he sent into her mouth made her hot. Her body was on fire and helplessly she arched against him. With a low growl, Ringo took her hands and stretched them high over her head to press against the wall. He moved his lower body against her until she felt the thickness of his erection against her pussy. He was huge and hard. Gasping out, she met him stroke for stroke. Someone could walk in at any moment but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but sensations that dipped and dived in her body. She wanted nothing more than to crawl up all that lean, rangy body and impale herself on his cock. Rayne brought her leg up to rest high against his hip, opening herself to him. When her vaginal walls contracted and expanded, she wanted to scream her frustration that he wasn't buried deep inside to ease the ache. Her flesh rippled with sensation as the she-beast deep inside her clawed for attention. She wanted out.

Ringo's dark Latino features, beautiful and sharp, seemed even harder to her when cast in shadow. White teeth flashed as he gritted them. He dragged his cock across her pussy, stroking her clit with each pass and he thrust wildly as if he couldn't get enough. "I. Don't. Want. This. Not now. Not ever."

All at once everything seized up inside her and Rayne drew breath to scream as intense pleasure made her fly apart in his arms. Ringo's mouth crashed down on her to swallow the sound as she convulsed. Instantly he let go and stepped back to stare at her

as if she were a stranger instead of a woman he'd known his entire life. The predatory stillness about him scared her but made her crave him too.

"You don't want me, Ringo?" Rayne wanted to bite her tongue the second the words left her mouth. Could she sound more pitiful? She hated her vulnerability and the realization that he didn't care for her.

Something softened in his face. He reached out and fisted a hand in her long curly hair. Tugging, drawing her head back he looked down at her with a surprisingly gentle gaze. "It's not you, Rayne. It's me."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" she whispered. An ache of longing and pain caused her heart to tighten. "What a lame thing to say."

He released her and stepped back, that sly all-knowing smile tilting his lips. "You'll do better without me, darlin'. I don't need a mate."

Those were the last words he spoke to her before she'd been taken. Now she lay on the hard, dusty ground, looking across the campfire at the men who'd taken her. Despite Ringo's rejection of her tonight, she knew he would come. Despite his moody, surly disposition, he was an honorable man. It was just a matter of time but he needed to hurry. The men were restless, nervous and waiting for word from someone named Zavalos, whom she assumed was the lycan in charge of their criminal activities. Stealing unmated lycan females was strictly forbidden among them and Rayne knew that nothing would save these two from pack justice.

Desperately she wished she could shift.

Nothing would please her more than to rip their throats out for taking her and the younger girls. Closing her eyes, she prayed they'd been recovered and brought back to their parents. Her own parents must be devastated. Worried. She'd lived her entire life being sheltered and pampered and loved. She'd never known anything else until tonight.

As the night wore on, she grew more nervous. Though her mouth was no longer taped, the same couldn't be said for her arms and legs. These men had tossed her on the ground like she was nothing more than garbage to be mishandled. The fun and flirty skirt she'd worn to the party tonight was bunched around her waist to expose her panties. The tiny white tee she wore was ripped and grimy and her shoes had been lost somewhere along the way. For the past hour the men had been talking quietly together, casting lustful looks her way and she knew she'd be lucky if they didn't rape her before delivering her to this Zavalos. Her only hope lay in the fact they were beta wolves who wouldn't want to tangle with their alpha.

When they began to talk of loading her up to travel farther south, terror set in. They spoke of Mexico. The packs there were wild and lawless. *Oh please, no.* The thought of never seeing her people again sent panic to run amok through her mind. Tears burned sharply behind her eyes but she didn't want these animals to see her cry. They'd enjoy it too much.

Then she said the wrong thing.

*I am already mated.*

The bigger one stomped toward her, lifted her upper torso from the ground and slapped her hard. Pain burst in her cheek and she fell backward. She knew what would come next. Pain. Degradation. A means to slate their lust. They were, after all, animals of the basest kind. A low cry broke from her lips but it was muted by the low growl that surfaced in the distance.

A flurry of black flew through the air.

The familiar wolf leaped upon the man who'd slapped her and they rolled together across the ground. The man shifted to wolf but he was vulnerable to the larger beast who ripped at his throat until he lay motionless. Rayne screamed at the suddenness, at the blood. A spray of it splattered across her chest and belly.

The other man jumped to his feet, fear wild in his eyes, as he instantly shifted into a gray wolf with a black muzzle. He whined once and then growled before going into a crouch.

“Ringo! Look out.”

The attack was sudden. Ringo snarled, met the other wolf with teeth gnashing. Then he backed away and began to circle the smaller wolf.

Lycans fought to the death when a loved one was threatened. It was their nature. Pack justice. Nothing would come from this skirmish but death and blood.

Rayne jerked when he sprang at the gray wolf. She was terrified but unable to tear her eyes from the sight. He was huge and beautiful, his coat as shiny black as his mysterious eyes. Her heart pounded, threatening to tear from her chest. It took but a moment for Ringo to finish the wolf. When both wolves lay bleeding on the ground, Ringo shifted into his human self and looked at her.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes. Get this tape off me.”

Naked, Ringo bent over her and took care of the tape binding her ankles and wrists and looked at her. More than anger flashed in his eyes. Something deeper, harder burned there. Without saying another word, he ran his hands over her body as if he couldn't resist touching her. He moved with slow precision, taking his time. His hands traced a path over her shoulders, down her breastbone and stroked over her waist and belly. A muscle worked in his jaw. Then he looked up and his fingers stroked her cheek with a tenderness she'd never before felt from a man. Ringo didn't say a word but lifted her into his arms and carried her to the truck belonging to the rogues.

Silence continued as he simply turned the key in the ignition and drove away from the scene. Rayne watched him, not knowing what to say. There were no words. Relief mixed with a bone-deep weariness. Curling in on herself, folding her legs up, she looked at him. His straight black hair fell across his forehead, glinting blue in the

dashboard light. In profile, his nose was a thin, sharp blade. If possible, his cheekbones were even sharper. His mouth, cruel but sensual, was tightened into a thin line.

Numbly, Rayne wondered if it was just easier to focus on his unique beauty than on what had just happened to her.

"Talk to me," he said as the truck bounced along the uneven ground.

"Uh-uh. Can't."

"Did they —"

"No! Please, Ringo. Just please. No more."

He cursed something foul under his breath. "Shh. Settle down. You're in shock. I'm taking you someplace where I can take care of you, Rayne. Don't worry about a thing. You're safe"

She wasn't worried. She was simply horrified. Everything tonight proved to be just too much but she was safe now. Safe with a man who was her mate but who didn't want her at all. After a while, she closed her eyes, listening to the drone of the truck as it ate up the miles between violence and home.

It wasn't until she felt Ringo brake to a stop and the engine shut off that she opened her eyes to take in her surroundings. They were at a familiar house on the Wolf Creek property. Several line shacks dotted the perimeters of the ten-thousand-acre ranch and, growing up in the area, she was familiar with all of them. This small but nice brick house was more than a shack however, and she knew, as a lycan dwelling, it would be stocked with clothing, phones, food and every necessity. Wolves didn't race the countryside with little suitcases, carrying clothing, so things were kept in the line shacks for convenience.

Relief shook her and her body trembled. She knew full well she'd reached the end of her tether. She would kill for a hot bath right now. And a bed. And sleep.

"We're here. How are you holding up?"

To her everlasting shame, her teeth started to chatter. She shook like a leaf. Ringo cursed and got out to come around the front of the truck and open the passenger door. When he pulled her up into his arms, she curled in on him, hanging on tightly as he ate up the distance between the truck and the front door.

She was safe now. Safe from the beasts who took her. Only one problem remained. Was she safe from this man who held her so possessively in his arms?

## **Chapter Two**

Overcome with the need to protect her, to take care of his mate, Ringo tightened his arms around her and headed toward the house, unmindful of the bits of gravel biting into his bare feet.

"Hang on," he whispered as he freed one arm to reach above the door to find the key that was always kept there. He pushed it into the lock and stepped into the dark house with her. The first order of business was to turn on a small lamp in the living room and though she protested that she could walk and he should put her down, he didn't. Guess she didn't realize what the loss of her would've done to him. If the rogue lycans hadn't stopped when they had, he'd still be running across the desert in hot pursuit.

When he reached the bathroom, he gently sat her on the toilet seat. "Let's get you into a bath."

Ringo desperately tried to come up with something to say that would wipe that terrorized expression from her face. Unused to offering comfort and feeling a total failure at it, he twisted the faucet of the oversized tub and in a second or two, water was gushing. Finally, he turned and looked down at her.

"I need to take your clothes off, honey."

When Rayne only blinked, he reached for the hem of what was left of her tee shirt and pulled it over her head. Her pretty breasts were plump enough to make his mouth water and were beautifully covered by a lacy little bra that was just sheer enough to give him a glimpse of her pink nipples. His cock twitched in response. Ruthlessly, he fought back the need that twisted deep in his belly.

Rayne's eyes widened as his gaze connected with hers. She would know what he was thinking and despite what many of the folks in Cloverfield thought of him, he

wasn't without manners. At least not completely. Slaking his lust on women who'd been traumatized wasn't his thing. "Don't look at me like I'm gonna jump your bones, darlin'." He forced himself to smile when he wasn't feeling at all light and happy. "Maybe another time."

Rayne shook her head. "No. No, I didn't think —"

"Forget it." If she started talking, he knew he'd give in to temptation in a heartbeat and kiss her just to reassure himself that she was okay. Rayne was from an old lycan family. She was sheltered and protected. But as casually as if he stripped down the town's princess every day, he reached around her and unhooked her bra.

*Damn!*

Ringo fought against licking his lips. Her breasts were more beautiful than he'd ever imagined.

Before he could stop himself, he pressed his mouth over her breastbone. He felt her heart thump hard and it was a miracle to him that she was alive and relatively unharmed. It was the most non-sexual kiss he'd ever given to anyone but Rayne wouldn't know that. The last thing he wanted was to scare her so he stood and drew her to her feet. Ringo unzipped her skirt, pushing it and her panties down her legs until they lay in a heap around her bare feet.

The scent of her curled around him but he ignored it as he reached over and turned off the water. Steam rose from the surface. She would need it hot but her skin was so damn delicate.

"Just a minute. Let me check it."

Ringo tested the water and stood to help her into the tub. When she sank into it with a little sigh, he fetched a fresh bar of soap, shampoo and set out a couple of towels. He felt Rayne's stare and looked over at her. A tiny smile settled on her mouth.

"You're taking good care of me, Ringo."



"Did you think I wouldn't?" The words slapped at her, sharp and ugly and he hated himself.

Rayne blinked and he wished he could just rip his damn unruly tongue from his mouth. He didn't possess an iota of class. A smart man, one who knew he had nothing good to offer a woman like her, would just keep his mouth shut and stay far away from temptation.

Frustrated with his stinkin' ineptitude, he shoved his fingers through his hair. "Fuck! I'm sorry. I'm an ass."

"No argument there."

When he looked at her again that wounded expression was gone, replaced by a look of wonder.

"It's weird," she said as she settled back against the tub, crossing her arms over her chest as if he hadn't already gotten an eyeful of her beautiful breasts.

Quickly he looked away. "What's weird?"

"How it is with mates. I feel your confusion, Ringo. I feel that you want to fuck me but you are conflicted. I'm not some delicate flower."

Not delicate? Like hell she wasn't delicate.

He whipped his head back and tried like everything to look scary. "Just so you know, I don't like having somebody in my head digging around. Sweet little girls like you have no idea what they're messing with."

Rayne was in shock. She'd been kidnapped for cryin' out loud and here she sat, rolling her eyes at him. Nope. He didn't fool her. At least not anymore. Ringo shook his head. "I'll be right back."

He stalked from the room, still bare-ass naked and went to the bedroom closet to fish out a pair of sweatpants from a built-in shelf. Nakedness among their kind wasn't a particularly shocking thing but he was rock-hard. Yep. She'd notice something like that.

Thinking it was best she not think of him like that, he pulled them on and grabbed a phone from the living room before heading back into the bath.

While he'd been gone, she had shampooed her hair. Light bubbles set atop the water and her sunset-bright hair was darker now as it clung damply to her neck and shoulders. Already the strands were curling up tighter than a corkscrew.

Trying to ignore the way she watched him, he sat on the toilet seat and pushed a button on the phone. A list of every lycan in Cloverfield had been programmed into it. It didn't take him long to find Angus Poteet's number and he punched the speed dial.

"I'm calling your folks."

Rayne sat up, anxiety written on every delicate curve of her face. Water sloshed over the rim of the tub and he noticed her hand gripping the edge of the tub. Without thinking, he caught it and bent to press his lips to the back of it.

The phone rang only once and then Angus' heavy voice barked a greeting into the phone.

"Ringo Ramone, Angus. I've got her. She's safe."

A long silence fell and then he heard Angus speaking to Brenda, Rayne's mother. He heard her quiet sound of joy and the sounds of crying. Angus returned his attention to the ongoing conversation. "Did they hurt her? Did they —"

"No. No, Angus. She's fine. Scared and scratched up and a little shocky."

"I'm coming to get her."

Ringo shook his head. "Not necessary. I know you want to see her but she's my responsibility." Damn. Had those words really just come out of his mouth? He wanted nothing to do with this mating business. Especially not with Rayne Poteet, despite how much the woman made him burn.

"What the hell are you talking about, Ramone?"

Rayne finally spoke up. "Let me talk to him, Ringo."

He handed her the phone. Her hands trembled as she gripped it and brought it to her ear. "Daddy?"

Tears filled her eyes and fell down her cheeks. Ringo couldn't bear it. He looked away before he did the unspeakable and yanked her into his arms.

"No, no, Dad. I'm okay. They just scared me a little but Ringo saved me."

The way she'd whispered the words *Ringo saved me* had him looking at her again. Hero worship rang loudly in her voice despite the way she'd whispered it all. He wanted to tell her that he was no one's idea of a hero, considering his father had been a traitor to them all. A mongrel dog couldn't be more worthless.

Ringo held his tongue as the pain of old memories tore him apart, bit by bit. He didn't deserve Rayne's adoration. Just the opposite. She deserved the world and he just wasn't the man who could give her that. Best she learn it now.

"I have to stay here, Dad," she continued quietly. She sniffed and Ringo watched her wipe at the tears on her cheeks. "Ringo's my mate. Yes. Please, Dad, just listen to me. I didn't know until just before those guys took me. I need to stay here for a while so we can work this all out. The thing is, he's mine and I'm his. We need to be together."

Wishing he could wipe the words she'd spoken from his mind, he watched her disconnect and lift her eyes to him. Careful to shield his vulnerability to the whole damn thing, he took the phone and called Joe, his alpha.

Once he'd assured Joe that Rayne was safe with him and that he'd taken care of the rogue lycans, they talked for a few minutes more and then Ringo hung up and set the phone down near the sink. When Rayne shivered uncontrollably again, he made a decision that he would probably live to regret. Shrugging out of his sweats, he tossed them aside and stepped into the tub.

"Ringo?"

He didn't give her time to protest but settled himself behind her and wrapped his arms around her damp body. Stretching his legs along the length of hers on either side,

he noted the fairness of her skin when contrasted to his darkness. "You're shaking like a leaf so hush and let me take care of you."

He dipped his hands in the warm water and drew them tenderly over her arms. His cock was brick-hard, rising between their bodies, pressing hard against her spine and ass as she cautiously settled back against him. She tensed a little bit and then released a long, shuddering breath before going limp against him. Ringo buried his face in her hair and, wanting to comfort, moved to rest it against her cheek. He looked down the front of her body. Her nipples were the color of pink cotton candy he'd once had at the state fair when he'd been a kid. Back when both parents had been honorable and he'd loved them. Drops of water glistened like fragile crystal on the puckered tips of nipples that had grown tight as colder air touched on them.

This was wrong, just plain wrong in so many ways but damn it, he wanted her so badly he ached. He wasn't going to act on what he wanted to do to her. No way. Now he just had to convince his body that he wasn't about to fuck her until she was screaming his name.

From the time she'd been a little girl, Rayne had watched Ringo Ramone with a fascination she'd never had for another living soul. He was dark, edgy, compelling and, in her mind, the romantic epitome of a rough, tough, cowboy. Though she'd never once seen him behave cruelly to others, she sensed the raw fear of other lycans when they were around him. She'd never understood that.

Tonight he'd been nothing but gentle and protective.

Leaning back against Ringo's firm, muscular body seemed almost as natural to her as breathing. The warm water soothed her but not as much as he did. His broad hands sent heated moisture over her arms and she sighed. When he settled his fingers tentatively against her ribs and lower, flutters set up in her belly, like a million butterflies batting their wings. Rayne knew that he wanted her. She could feel his emotions as if they were her own and mixed with his concern for her, there was a low

burning lust that caused her heartbeat to rush toward a frantic pace. Reciprocating the emotions, the feelings of latent desire, she slowly released her breath and let her need for him sink into her very bones. Her pussy ached as the strongly pulsing flesh beat in tandem with her pulse.

"I love the way you touch me, Ringo," she whispered, turning her head to rest her cheek against his chest.

"I shouldn't be touching you and we both know it."

"Ah, stubborn man."

Ringo breathed out sharply as if he'd asked himself an internal question and promptly answered it. His fingers spread out over her belly and began to stroke her flesh. She sent her own hands on a discovery of strong forearms, honed from years of working a ranch. Finally being able to touch him the way she'd always dreamed was a miracle to her despite the circumstances that had brought it about.

Memories of the night and all that had happened replayed in her mind like an old movie ratcheted up to warp speed and suddenly she gasped and turned in his arms. Going up to her knees, she gripped his shoulders.

"Ringo!"

He went still. His eyes narrowed. "What is it?"

Several young girls had been taken by the rogue lycans. How could she have forgotten?

"The girls. What happened to the other girls? Gods! I feel so selfish!"

Ringo instantly relaxed and reached to cup her face in his hands. "Shh. They're fine. Your dad filled me in, Rayne. The others got them back and they are safe with their families. They were found a hell of a lot quicker than you were. I doubt they have a scratch on them."

Rayne closed her eyes in thankful relief. "They are only teenagers! When I think of how scared they must have been to be taken that way, I just want to —"

"Stop it, honey!" He reached out and settled her against him. "It's over now."

Relief mixed with the adrenaline that raced through her blood. Everything seemed more colorful, brighter and more intense. Now that she was fully facing Ringo, she absorbed the feel of her breasts pressed tightly to his chest. His hands, cruising the length of her back, sent sensation zipping straight through her belly where it settled in her pussy like a ball of twisting heat. Her butt was planted firmly on his rock-hard thigh and his thick cock pressed the side of her hip.

Without thinking, without stopping to ask, she pressed her lips to the dent of his collarbone. She teased his skin with her tongue. Ringo groaned low and tightened his hold. It was all the invitation she needed. Her mouth got busy sipping drops of water from the mounds of his chest, his nipples. Flicking one with her tongue, she lightly sucked.

"Christ! Rayne! Aw honey, you don't know what you're doing."

Her tongue flicked again then moved to the other nipple. "I know exactly what I'm doing, Ringo. I want you."

"You don't know what you're saying." He caught her head and Rayne saw the stark emotion swirling in his dark eyes. His feelings hit her with the force of a sledgehammer. Torn. So torn. Fragile, in a strange way, for such a kickass man.

"I'm not a child."

"No shit."

"Please, Ringo. You are my mate. This is right. I know you can feel it."

"Fuck *feelings*, Rayne. Sweetheart, you've been through too much tonight."

Anger whipped through her, hot and unexpected. She bolted back and stood on her knees in the bath as she glared at the dumb-assed man. "I'm not stupid. I know what I feel. Know what *you* feel too, big guy. Lucky me."

His hands reached out to pull her back but she managed to stand and step, dripping, from the tub. Reaching for a towel, she held it in front of herself and looked at

him. The big beast was scowling at her. Well, let him scowl. If he was too hardheaded to accept how things were between them, then he could just go to hell.

She didn't need this rejection tonight on top of everything else she'd been through. Using the towel, fury feeding her actions, she glared at him as she wrapped the soft terry cloth around her body. "I might not be your idea of a perfect mate, Ringo. You've made your opinion perfectly clear, but damn it, you are stuck with me. Get over it."

When she spun away, heading through the bathroom door, she heard a splash, heard him curse. But by the time she'd shrugged out of the towel and climbed between the cold sheets of the bed, her anger had been replaced by hurt. Tears burned in her eyes and she snuggled in, listening to Ringo move around the darkened room.

A few minutes later the bed shifted and she felt Ringo invade her space. He adjusted the sheets to cocoon them both.

"Come here," he said, his voice low and raspy. He drew her into his arms until his naked, very aroused body was pressed close to hers. Rayne released the breath she'd been holding and gave up. Melting into him, feeling his warmth, his sudden acceptance of the situation, she closed her eyes and sank into sleep.

## **Chapter Three**

Ringo was yanked from the haunting dream of his father locked in mortal combat with the pack's former alpha. The nightmare always ended the same way, with Father lying dead and bleeding upon the dusty ground while he and his mother looked on in horror. Now the dream was different as the vision faded and on the perimeter of conscious thought something warm slithered over his body. Opening his eyes, surrounded by the utter stillness that always came just before dawn, he saw Rayne's curls pool across his chest as her warm, sweet mouth teased across his chest and lower.

"If this is a dream, I don't think I wanna wake up," he whispered as he filled his hands with her hair. So soft. She murmured something unintelligible against his belly and he felt the touch clear to his toes. Rayne lay between his thighs working him over with her lips and tongue. His cock was cradled between her pretty breasts. The pillowy softness felt so damn good, he arched against them, rubbing to relieve the pressure. Her body moved against him as she sucked at his belly then moved lower.

"What are you doing to me, woman?"

"I had to touch you. I felt your sadness. The sadness from your dreams. I've been watching you sleep for a while." She dragged her tongue over the length of his erection and he sucked in a breath. Her breath drifted over him. "I didn't realize your shields would be down while you slept, Ringo."

*Huh?* He'd think about that pesky little problem later. Right now he just wanted to know what good thing had he done lately that caused him to deserve this. Her mouth felt like sweet seduction as she tasted him, wrapping her hand at the base and squeezing with delicious precision. The other hand went between his thighs, straight to his tightly drawn balls. Her fingers lightly stroked him there, sending a shiver to dance over every inch of his body.



*Damn!*

The woman knew how to touch a man.

He'd had plenty of females, human and lycan, but no one had ever made him feel like he was wound up in a ball of sensation. If he hadn't known Rayne was his mate before, he knew it now.

Sending his fingers through her hair to grip her head, a low animalistic growl curled above them as his beast felt the pleasure too. Sensual power, heat, whipped through his senses as she took him into her mouth to suck.

"Gods! Rayne, honey, that feels so good."

She released his cock from her mouth and looked up through a curtain of reddish curls, gave him a teasing little lick on the head. He'd always thought that siren's smile the prettiest thing he'd ever seen, but never expected to see it on her lips when she looked at him. She was earthy, sensual, and she flat-out stole his breath. "You like it? Let me give you more, cowboy."

Her head went down again as she sucked him more powerfully. His toes curled but suddenly it wasn't enough to just receive pleasure from a woman. For the first time in his long life he wanted to give as good as he got. Ringo tugged her hair a bit. "Look at me, honey. Ah, that's good but look at me. Stop."

Rayne's eyes were wide as she peered up at him, questions swirling there.

"Come up here." Reaching down, he gently pulled and tugged until she was no longer lying between his thighs but on all fours at his side, her face hovered over his pulsing cock. "Bring your sweet ass to my mouth. I'm gonna eat you out. Been wanting to taste you for a long time."

He sensed her reluctance to expose herself so much but he was dying here. Gently, when he wasn't a gentle man at all, he touched the bare curve of her butt and guided her until she straddled his mouth. Her scent, both lupine and human, whispered through his senses. Her body was turned away from him as she faced his feet. Coaxing her down until their bodies were pressed together, Ringo settled her knees on either

side of his head. As her breath brushed the head of his cock, he looked his fill at the rosy pink, very wet flesh of her pussy.

"Suck my cock, honey. Now."

As her mouth took him in to the hilt and she sucked strongly then lightly, moving her mouth over him, he drew his tongue along her sweet slit. He sent his tongue deep through the quivering folds as his fingers gripped her ass. Rayne's low moan vibrated against his cock, sending him surging into her mouth as pleasure held him deep in its grip. Then he went to work on the rest of her pussy, drawing her clit into his mouth to gently suck. He buried his fingers deep in her until they were drenched, and began to finger-fuck her with strong, sure strokes.

Intense pleasure roared through his blood, tingling along his spine as they moved together as if they'd always fucked this way. As he teased and played, he felt a change come over Rayne. She went still above him. It was time. Gently, he drew on her flesh until with a low cry she came. With his cock buried deep in her mouth, she continued to suck him, every whimpering sound she made vibrating on his flesh like a tuning fork. Unable to resist as pleasure rolled through his belly, his cock and his balls, he let go, pumping into her mouth as he just lost it.

Above him, Rayne trembled and he gentled her with his mouth, his tongue. His hands stroked her thighs as he breathed the scent of her. Finally, she rolled from his body. He reached down and drew her up into his arms. Her breath fluttered rapidly against his chest. He hadn't wanted this to happen but it was too late. One taste would never be enough for him. Fisting his hands in her hair, he tugged until she looked up at him. Dawn began to filter through the flimsy curtains at the bedroom window as Ringo drank in her features. A soft smile curved her lips.

"I'm not done with you, Rayne."

"Good to know."

Gripping a slender shoulder, he settled her back until he could loom over her. "What am I going to do with you? You know this doesn't change a thing about our situation but damn it, I can't get enough of you, of this."

"Anyone ever tell you that you talk too much?" she asked.

"Hell no."

He kissed her, slow and deep, tasting himself on her tongue, as his hands swept her body. Rayne's arm curled around his shoulders to touch his neck and play with his too-long, shoulder-length hair. When he drew back to look at her, she was smiling again.

"Maybe you are just a chatterbox with me."

A chatterbox? Him? Nobody he knew would dare to tease him. Sometimes she just said the weirdest things. She had the strange ability to make him smile. There had been little laughter in his life but with her everything felt so fresh. With her, it was as if he was that young boy again, the one who knew how to laugh before his humanity had been buried along with his traitorous father. Ringo ruthlessly shoved those emotions away and took her nipple in his mouth.

Rayne's fingers twisted in his hair, holding him close. She pushed herself closer, tighter, and he scraped the tightly drawn morsel with his teeth. He slid one thigh between hers, feeling the drenched flesh of her pussy dampen his skin. Like other lycan women, she had no body hair. Rubbing his thigh against her clit, he heard Rayne catch her breath. She writhed against him as he pressed and suddenly it was too much.

"You asked for it," he whispered against her nipple. Tentatively, just wanting a peek into her mind, he dropped his shields. Hers were thrown wide open. Fierce, savage emotion shifted from her to him and he fed it back to her. He felt her need to please him, her desire to belong to him. He noted her need for sex, hot and wild. The she-wolf buried deep inside her howled to break free and run the desert with her male counterpart.

His wolf answered the call, shifting deep inside him, stretching, searching for his mate. Ringo moved over Rayne and settled himself between her thighs. No condoms

were necessary since lycans carried no disease and Rayne would not be fertile until she shifted into her wolf. The freedom to wildly fuck her called to his basest instincts. Already she was wet and ready, so he took his cock in his hand and dragged it over her flesh once, then again, before plunging deep and hard into her body.

Rayne cried out.

Her vaginal walls gripped tighter than a fist as he shoved himself in then out, gritting his teeth at the stunning sensations. But it wasn't enough. He wanted to go deeper, harder. Looping his arms beneath her knees, he lifted her legs and, going to his knees, thrust with savage intensity. He rotated against her clit and she called his name. Again and again he plunged and withdrew as her silken flesh milked him. Ringo leaned closer to her body and caught her nipple with his lips, stroked with his tongue. Just that tiny increment of movement rubbed a spot deep inside her that made her breath expel sharply. Repeatedly he stroked the spot until she gasped a sound and her mouth opened on a shriek that sent Ringo over the edge. Taking her with him, he thrust and stilled as sensation gathered in his balls to streak up through his body. A low, unearthly growl came from between his gritted teeth as his beast made its presence known.

He collapsed over her and felt her arms go around him to hold him close. Sex wasn't rare for him yet he couldn't recall a time when gentleness had followed the fast, hot fucking he was used to. But Rayne was different from the others. Apparently she wanted all of him, not just what he could give her in bed. Afraid he would crush her, he rolled to her side and drew her close.

Rayne buried her face in his throat. "I could feel you. All of you. You were just there, Ringo. In my mind, in my body," she whispered. "Could you feel me too?"

"Yeah."

Gods! He was in so much trouble.

Lycan men certainly possessed a lot of stamina, Rayne thought as they headed toward his house near the Wolf Creek Ranch. They had showered together after that

smokin' hot predawn sex and he'd taken her again. Luckily the shower wall survived the experience and she had *more* than survived! Despite the quivering of her overworked thighs, she felt glowing and suddenly brand-new.

Still, Ringo was holding back.

She could feel it, sense it.

As the miles to the main ranch rolled by, she stared out across the prairie as if it hadn't been a part of her life since the hour of her birth. The rough terrain might not be beautiful to some but for her, it was home. Her pack had moved here generations ago after leaving Scotland and had established the town of Cloverfield on the isolated Texas plains. It was a place free of humans, where they could live in peace with no questions about longevity, why they were so fast and strong and why they sometimes turned furry. Her friends and family operated the town as if it were just like any other. They had lawyers, teachers, bankers and shopkeepers like herself.

She owned Poteet's On the Prairie, a little shop that carried clothing and gifts, boots and shoes. You name it, she pretty much had it. Years ago, her father had given her start-up money to open the store and she hadn't looked back. No. She didn't really need the money. Lycans lived for such a long time that fortunes were easily amassed. Her father Angus had farmed several thousand acres of land until recently when he'd given up growing veggies and begun wind farming. Now his windmills dotted the horizon like giant metal skeletons, supplying power to the entire area.

Their customs were different from other Texans but they still all wanted the same things. Love. Life. Family. Home. Freedom. Her people had found all of those things here in this desolate place.

She glanced at Ringo. The strong morning sun streaked across his chiseled Latino features and her breath caught in her lungs. Those pesky butterflies flittered happily in her stomach. Feelings for him, the strongest she'd ever experienced for anyone, zipped through her body, making her ache to touch him. Every teenaged lycan girl dreamed of

who her mate might be. Hours were spent speculating over who would be the male to spark that psychic, empathic connection that would make him hers.

Over the years, she'd hoped and prayed that one day the silent, smoldering Ringo Ramone would be hers.

Ringo didn't want her though.

She felt his reticence and the way he was so careful to shield his feelings from her. Up to now, the only time she got a glimpse of him was during sex. That wouldn't be enough. Not for her. She wanted everything. His rare smiles, his secret thoughts, but damn it, she wasn't going to beg for what she saw as her right.

Feeling unsettled at Ringo's silence, she glanced his way. The morning was cool and the windows in the old pickup were rolled down. He had one arm propped in the open window and the slow-moving wind caught his black hair and whipped the shiny stuff around. Unsmiling, he looked over at her.

"We'll be there soon." His black eyes went over her like a steamy caress as he took in the oversized tee shirt she'd taken from the stash of emergency clothing. The thing hung past her skirt, which had somehow managed to survive last night's adventures. She'd lost her shoes somewhere along the way so she was barefoot. "You look like a puff of wind would blow you away," he drawled.

"Criticism, Ringo?"

His eyes widened fractionally as if her words surprised him. "Just an observation. Don't get your panties in a twist." Finally he blew out a breath. "Look. You're just small, Rayne, not like most of our women. That's all I meant."

Maybe talking wasn't such a good idea, she thought as she glanced away. Women in her pack prided themselves on the fact they were powerful and strong. Frailty among them happened of course but it wasn't cool to be considered such. Rayne knew that once she was able to shift, she would be as fast and strong as most of the pack's women, just in a smaller package. Did he believe she was an inferior mate because of her lack of size?

Obviously!

It was hard hiding her hurt feelings but she gave it her best shot as they drove past the main house, then a little farther down the road to Ringo's place. The brick house was fairly close to the main house and Rayne figured it was because of Ringo's position in the pack as first lieutenant. She immediately spotted Joe McKinnon, their alpha, and his mate Quinn.

There was something about seeing her friend that caused emotion to well up, sharp and tight, in her chest. Her eyes burned. She'd just had it with men at this point! When the truck braked to a stop, Quinn rushed up. Rayne threw open the door and was immediately wrapped up in a hug.

"Oh honey! I've been so worried."

"I'm okay. Just tired and a little scratched." She looked into her friend's concerned face and mustered a smile. "But you know us. The wounds are almost gone now."

Quinn pulled back and wrapped one arm around her. "Come inside. You need a little TLC, I think. I'll put on some coffee, assuming Ringo has some."

She felt the men watching her and was uncomfortable with all the scrutiny but then Joe, walked up and settled a big hand on her shoulder. Concern flashed in his golden eyes. "Do you need anything, Rayne? Anything at all?"

For the gazillionth time, she realized how utterly gorgeous her alpha was. Joe McKinnon was every bit as big as Ringo, yet where Ringo was whipcord lean, Joe was more massive. He looked like the Scottish Highlanders from whom he'd descended. She shook her head and managed a smile. "No, I'm home and that's what matters now."

Quinn led her into Ringo's house as the men talked quietly. Their rumbling voices came to her on the wind but all at once she didn't care about being the topic of conversation. She wanted comfort and just one single moment that wasn't riddled with sexual tension. Once she was settled at Ringo's kitchen table and the scent of coffee hung rich in the air, Quinn sat across from her and took her hand.

"When they took you last night, I was so scared. We all were," Quinn began. "But I get the feeling you're more upset about Ringo. Want to talk about it?"

Rayne sighed. "Guess Joe told you that Ringo is my mate?" At Quinn's nod, she continued. "We didn't know it until last night when you and Joe announced your consummation. I'm thrilled for you, by the way."

"Thanks. I've never been happier."

"It shows."

"How did Ringo react to all of this?" Quinn asked.

Rayne took a sip of coffee then gasped when she realized it was black. Quickly she added little cream from the tiny pitcher that Quinn had set on the table and gave her coffee a stir. "Well, you know Ringo. He barely says two words but he wants me. Sexually but not as a mate. Typical."

Anger slid into Quinn's brilliant blue eyes. "Want me to kick his ass for you, honey?"

She had to laugh. Quinn wasn't a tiny, petite woman by any stretch of the imagination and could hold her own with anyone but their men were huge and powerful. Rayne rolled her eyes. "Oh lordy! I'd pay good money to see that." Then she shook her head. "We'll figure it out. He knows full well that we mate for life and if he doesn't consummate with me, then I'm destined to live alone. He knows it! We'll always be connected, if not fully through the consummation, then in other ways. Looks like he's stuck with me but he's not a damn bit happy about it."

Quinn sat back in her chair and eyed her steadily. "It occurs to me that when the phrase 'lone wolf' was coined, they might've been speaking of Ringo Ramone."

"Ain't it the truth! I need time to think logically. Right now my body is on sexual overload. I want him so badly that I ache but I need more. Know what I mean?"

"Yes, I do. You want it all. All of him. And honey, you deserve it."

"I'm not going to settle for less, Quinn, believe me but I'll be damned if I beg him!"



\* \* \* \* \*

On the drive back into town, Rayne made up her mind. She'd fallen so easily into sex with Ringo. Playing the whimpering heroine to his Latino machismo wasn't a role she would act on again. Sure, the circumstances had prompted a closeness between them both but there was no excuse for a woman to get into anything hot and heavy with a man who seemed to hate himself for his own need. She'd had enough!

Ringo was quiet, introspective, but when wasn't he?

Rayne was careful not to read anything into his behavior and when they pulled up into front of Poteet's On the Prairie, it was with a measure of relief. Earlier, she'd collected her purse from Quinn, who had taken charge of it when she'd been abducted the night before. Now she dug through the bag, took out the keys and stepped from the truck to the asphalt street.

Ringo beat her to the door and removed the keys from her hand. "Let me."

"I don't need your help. I'm perfectly capable of opening my own door." She practically snapped the words out but then relented when he pushed the key into the lock, allowing them to step into the shop. He gave her a surly look.

"Too damn bad."

Sunlight came through the storefront windows to settle across the old hardwood floors and across the rounds of clothing she offered for sale. Small bowls of potpourri were kept sitting around here and there to dash a spicy fragrance into the air. It was Sunday and the store would remain closed until tomorrow when she'd be opening bright and early. Ringo followed her to the back, through the office and storage area, into her personal space.

She'd always loved her cozy, little apartment in back though her parents had often encouraged her to get something bigger. Tossing her bag into an overstuffed chintz chair, she turned to look at him. "Thanks for bringing me home."

He seemed to fill up the small living room as he stood there quietly looking around. "This is nice. I've never been here before."

Oddly pleased when she wanted to remain pissed, she managed a smile. "Thanks. I like it."

"It suits you. Beautiful and sweet-smelling."

Rayne caught her breath. Compliments from this man were so unexpected. The pace of her heartbeat picked up. Her bedroom was so close. They could be sprawled on her bed, pressed together, naked and sweaty, in a matter of seconds and they both knew it. Heat flashed in his dark eyes and, in instant response, her panties were drenched with the passion he called from her so easily. Instinctively she backed up. "Thank you, Ringo. For everything."

"Dismissing me?"

"Um. Yeah. I'm tired. Just so tired and I have a lot of thinking to do."

His eyes went instantly from smoldering to cold. "You're right. You don't need me here hanging around like a wounded pup."

Shaking her head, she stepped forward but it was his turn to back away. "No. I didn't mean it like that. The last thing you are is wounded."

The minute she said those words, she went still. Ringo was probably the most wounded man she'd ever known. Feeling dumb and inept, she shook her head and sighed. Would she ever figure out this relationship stuff?

"You've got that right, Rayne," he said. The King of Surliness was back with a vengeance. "And don't forget it." His gaze flicked over her, down then up, before finally connecting. "If you need me for anything at all, call me. You have my number."

Rayne stood in the middle of the room and listened to the heels of his boots hit the hardwood floors as he walked away. She closed her eyes when memories of what they'd done together whipped through her mind. Feeling his loss like a physical blow, she listened to the cowbell over the door of her shop clang as he left.

## **Chapter Four**

Several weeks later, Ringo was heading out of the barn when Joe hollered from across the yard. Repeatedly tossing a ring full of keys in the air and catching them, Joe stopped by the driver's side door of his big black truck. "Why don't you come with me, brother? I could use the company."

Ringo nodded as he grabbed a bandana from his back pocket and mopped his forehead. Hot today. He'd been working with the horses since dawn so a break wasn't going to kill him. He shoved his black cowboy hat on his head and walked toward him. "Where are we going?"

"Get in and I'll tell you."

It wasn't until the huge truck roared to life and headed down one of the ranch's many dirt paths that he looked over at his alpha. "Think this is the first time any of us have seen you without your mate for quite awhile, Joe. Where's that pretty Mrs. McKinnon today?"

Ringo wasn't the kind of man to notice things like happiness on the face of another guy but it was hard to miss the expression of bliss his alpha wore. Joe seemed calmer, more at ease, since he'd finally consummated things with his mate. There was still an underlying aura of menace about the man but Ringo figured that just came with the territory when you were discussing an alpha male lycan.

Joe slid his golden-brown eyes his way then redirected them to the path. "She's in town, visiting Rayne."

Ringo went still. He'd purposely avoided Rayne since the day he'd left her at her place but just the mention of her name made him catch his breath. There was no denying he had a serious case of lust for the woman. She was his mate. There was no way around it though he wished it were otherwise. Despite the way she'd felt when he

fucked her, the responsive way she'd moved beneath him, he knew this was a great big cosmic mistake. Still, he couldn't stop thinking about her. She haunted his every waking moment and dominated his dreams.

"They had lunch at Rayne's shop and I think Rayne's mom Betty joined them," Joe continued. "Quinn is considering leasing the empty space next to Poteet's. She closed her gift shop in the Piney Woods and all the merchandise is being boxed and shipped here to Cloverfield."

"Sounds like a plan." Ringo frowned as he expressed his thoughts aloud. "I like the idea of Quinn being next door to Rayne. She could use some company since we're pretty short of females around here. Most of our women are either mated and settled or they are still attending Cloverfield High School."

"That's what I was thinking. Quinn's still new to the area too. It will be good for her to have a friend who can show her the ropes." Joe sighed and tipped the brim of his battered cowboy hat back with his forefinger. "Not only that, with Quinn having a shop in town, it'll give me more of an excuse to check on Rayne. After what happened a few weeks ago, I'm not sure she's safe."

"What the fuck are you saying, Joe? Is she in danger? Do you think I'm incapable of taking care of my mate?" Ringo's words lashed like a whip.

"Didn't say that."

"Then what are you saying? Exactly."

Joe pierced him with a dark gaze. "Time for you to stop avoiding Rayne and take care of your responsibilities. Like it or not, she is destined to be yours but you're acting like she's diseased or something. She's a good woman. Beautiful. She has a kind, warm heart and plenty of sass to keep things interesting for a man."

"I fucking know that!"

"Then do something about it. Don't leave it to others to protect her."

Silence filled the cab of the truck before he finally spoke. "What if I need to protect her from me?"

Joe stopped the truck in the wide open prairie and if Ringo hadn't been eaten up with rage and frustration he might've wondered why they were at the ranch's small airstrip. His alpha looked at him and huffed a breath. "What happened with your father had nothing to do with you."

"So you say. Bart always said it too, when he was alive. But saying it doesn't make it so. I have my fathers' blood running through my veins. Bad blood."

"Fuck that! You'd better get a grip, my brother, before it's too late and you lose everything."

In the distance, they heard the roar of a jet engine and without another word both men exited the truck to look up.

"Who's on that plane, Joe?"

"It's Silas MacAdam. He's coming for a visit."

Silas MacAdam was the Supreme Ruler of them all and held sway over all lycans from his castle in Scotland. Something serious was going on for the man to cross an ocean. Dread balled tighter than a fist in his belly. Did his visit have anything to do with the rogue lycans who stole Rayne?

Ringo looked at his alpha as the plane settled on the ground and rolled to a stop. "Why is he here, Joe? Why now?"

"Trouble's brewing. We'll fill you in later. But I'm telling you for your own good, you need to keep careful watch over your mate."

\* \* \* \* \*

Rayne stuffed hot pink tissue with white polka dots into a gaily wrapped gift bag, handed it to the customer and waved goodbye before heading back to the littered table near the back of the shop. Quinn was wadding up the paper that had contained her sandwich, helping Rayne's mom Betty clean up the mess from lunch.

Her mom, looking like an older version of herself, smiled up at her. "Are you finished, honey? You barely touched your lunch."

Rayne plopped down into her chair, seeing the concern in her mom's face. "Not hungry. Really, I'm fine. You have to stop hovering, Mom."

"I can't blame her after all you've been through lately," Quinn interjected as she took a final sip of her tea then rattled the ice in her plastic cup. "You just aren't acting yourself."

They'd spent the past hour or so discussing the opening of Quinn's new shop, which would adjoin her own, and despite all that had happened to her, she was caught up in the excitement. They had decided to tear down a segment of the wall between their spaces and coordinate the decor leading from one store into the other. They'd discussed colors and themes.

"I'll be fine. I'll admit I've been seriously freaked-out lately." Rayne scooped her hair back into a haphazard ponytail and tied it off with a small elastic tie that she wore on her wrist for just such occasions. "I keep feeling as though I'm being watched."

Noting the alarmed expressions of her mom and friend, she quickly waved it off and rolled her eyes. "Forget it. It's nothing but my overactive imagination. I'm being careful."

"Have you told, Ringo?" her mom asked. "After all, he's *supposed* to be your mate but he damn sure isn't acting like it."

"That's enough, Mom! It's just taking him awhile to warm up to the idea."

Rayne knew it was more than that. He'd always been a secretive, moody beast but there was more to the story. She just knew it.

"Do you want me to talk to Joe?" The question came from Quinn, whose worry burned sharply in her vivid blue eyes.

"Gods no! Seriously. I don't need men hovering around."

*Just Ringo.*

She wouldn't mind a little hovering from him but obviously he'd shoved her right out of his thoughts. Fighting off the hurt, she stood, determined to stay busy so she wouldn't overthink things. Gathering up the lunch mess, she headed to the trash can then turned to find Quinn standing there. The strap of her purse was adjusted on her shoulder and Rayne knew she had to get back to the ranch. Quinn reached out and hugged her. "Let me know if you need anything, okay. All it'll take is one call and I'm here."

Quinn gave Betty Poteet a little wave. "I'd better hit the road. Silas MacAdam and his mate Martha are coming in for a big meeting."

Rayne exchanged a startled look with her mom. "The Supreme is coming? Do you know why?"

Quinn shook her head. "Have no clue but I know there's supposed to be a big thing at the ranch tomorrow night." Quinn frowned. "Joe hasn't said but I think it has something to do with the rogue lycans."

When Quinn left with a promise to call with more plans on connecting their spaces, Rayne turned to her mom, noting the fear on her face. Reaching out, she took her hand and squeezed it firmly. "They aren't coming back to steal me away, Mom. Don't worry."

Tears filled her mother's eyes. "I never want to go through that worry again! I've never felt so helpless in my life. You haven't gone through the change yet and have no way to protect yourself from a wolf who wanted to take you."

"Soon, Mom! I know I'll go through the change soon and I have a mate to help me through it."

Betty snorted and rolled her eyes. "Ringo Ramone! He has avoided you since the night you spent together. You came home with his scent all over you. Yes, he wants you but doesn't seem in any hurry to consummate. I'd like to just *shoot* that man! You're too good for the likes of him."

Anger sped like lightning through her veins and Rayne felt her face heat. "Don't say that! Come on. Can't you be supportive? It's just taking him a little time to get used to the idea and for what it's worth, he agrees with you."

"What do you mean?" Her mom leaned close, concern in her eyes, and Rayne suddenly felt guilty for snapping at her.

She blew out a breath. She'd always been comfortable confiding in her mom. They'd always been close. Shaking her head, she thought of Ringo's words to her and the feelings she'd felt coming from him. "He doesn't believe he deserves me. I just don't know why. He seems to see me as some kind of pampered princess and that's just not me."

Seeming resolved to something, Betty stood and walked over to the coffeepot that rested on a small table nearby and poured them both a cup, remembering to add a splash of cream. She returned to her chair and set them down. "In many ways, you *have* been a pampered princess, Rayne. Your father and I made sure that you've had not only the things you need but the things you want. No, you've never acted spoiled in any way. You are generous and loving but, honey, we come from a long, distinguished line of lycans. We trace our roots back all the way back to Scotland. The same can't be said for Ringo Ramone."

Rayne frowned at her mother. "Do you realize you are a mass of contradictions? You've already said you don't blame Ringo for the acts of his father. Come on, Mom. Make up your mind."

Betty sighed and shook her head. "I know. Damn it. I'm just ticked off. He should treat you better."

"And you shouldn't be snob, Mom." She reached over and laid her palm over her mother's hand. "I know that once we came to America, we integrated with other packs and became something of a melting pot."

"Well, it's the American way, isn't it?" Betty smiled then took a sip of her coffee. "Bart Fitzgerald, Quinn's dad, was our alpha when Ringo first came to us. A Mexican



pack lost their leader and members were absorbed into the Wolf Creek pack. In those days, we were growing, building our town, while continuing to abide by the strict laws laid down by our Supreme. Ringo's parents seemed happy here but then, when he was just a boy, his father went a little crazy. He challenged Bart for leadership and you know what that means."

Rayne sucked in a breath. "A fight to the death."

"Yes." Betty shook her head. "It didn't end well for Ringo's father. I'll never forget the night it happened. My heart just went out to that child. No little kid should have to pay for the mistakes of a parent but that's what happened. He saw the whole thing. From what I heard, he sneaked out of his house that night. You know we don't allow children to be present for a challenge."

"Of course not!"

"This sort of thing is fairly rare with us, as you know. Anyway, a few days later Ringo's heartbreak was compounded when his mother committed suicide."

Rayne's eyes burned and tears spilled down her cheeks as she imagined the horror he must have lived through, the fear and the loneliness. No wonder he kept himself at such a distance.

"Poor Ringo."

"I know," Betty said. Sorrow filled her eyes at the retelling. "Bart took him in and reared him as his own but I imagine, he has always felt something of an outsider. A charity case."

"Why didn't I know about this," she asked in a whisper.

"Those of us who were here at the time never speak of it. It would be hurtful to him if the gossip was bandied about and it's just not our way to harm another pack member. He was a child at the time and nothing that happened was his fault."

Silence fell between them and, if anything, her feelings for Ringo were even stronger than before. Her chest was tight from the impact of this new knowledge. "I have my work cut out for me, don't I?"

Betty reached out and pulled her close for a hug. "Oh yes, honey, you certainly do."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ringo parked his truck on a quiet residential street a few blocks from Main and, glancing around to see not a soul stirring, he stepped out from behind the steering wheel and quickly shucked his clothes and boots. Narrowing his eyes into the prevalent darkness, he shifted and padded off toward Rayne's place. Every night since he'd left her, standing there looking like a wounded doe, he'd made the trek into town to keep an eye out for her safety.

From what Joe said, these rogues were in desperate need of unconsummated females and would stop at nothing to get them. The situation was grim enough that Silas MacAdam, the Supreme, had traveled here to oversee plans for hunting them down and bringing them to justice. As far as he was concerned, this put Rayne in harm's way and he wasn't about to let her be taken again. The very thought of it sent a chill through him and he increased his pace to the small yard she'd built out back of her shop. Slinking through the shadows, he paused behind a crape myrtle bush and hunkered down to watch. With his heightened senses, he noted the scurrying of a couple of squirrels as they dashed up the bark of a giant live oak tree and smelled the scent of the rose-pink blossoms that covered the big bush he lay beneath.

Ringo stretched out to lay his muzzle on his paws.

The little yard was neat and had a homey feel to it with its big barrels full of flowers and brick-paved patio. Big comfortable-looking chairs were settled around an oval table and he wondered if she entertained guests out here when the weather wasn't too hot. Dark green ivy climbed up the walls to frame the half-glass kitchen door. Two big iron planters sat on either side of it, each filled with brilliant red geraniums. He didn't know

shit about decorating but it was obvious to him that Rayne had a touch with making things look pretty and comfortable.

He hadn't had much *pretty* in his life, at least not until he'd been slapped upside the head with the knowledge that Rayne was his mate. Staying away from her these past two weeks had been misery. Many had been the night, he'd lain awake, his cock aching with the need to claim her. Watching over her this way would have to do. He wanted her. Wanted to consummate with her. The notion of having a home with her threatened to bring him to his knees but he knew he had to protect her. The taint of his blood was real. He had to live with it but she sure as hell didn't have to.

Suddenly the back door opened and Ringo stilled as Rayne stepped into the shadowy night. Her hair was down, curling around her face. She wore dark shorts and a skimpy tank top thing that bared a strip of her white belly. Ringo took in the long length of her legs and felt his heartbeat pick up. She narrowed her eyes and looked around the yard as if she sensed a presence. Damn. It was good she was being cautious but he didn't want to be the cause of her fear.

When she turned, facing away, to peer deeper into the shadows he caught a glimpse of the way her mighty fine ass fitted in those itty-bitty shorts and Ringo felt his wolveren body tense in response. Shifting quickly, he stepped back and fisted his hand around the base of his cock. He was a fucking perv to be watching her this way, all the time wanting to take her against the nearest wall and fuck her sweet pussy until they both came long and hard. Very carefully, he let down his shields. Just a bit. He had to know if she was as nervous as she seemed.

Instantly, he knew that was the wrong thing to do when Rayne gasped and spun around quickly. "Ringo? Ringo, are you there?" she whispered.

Their connection was even stronger than he'd thought. He stepped from his spot behind the bush and watched her eyes widen in surprise.

"Yeah, it's me."

A look that might have been relief passed over her face, and then her gaze traveled down the length of his body as he stepped naked into the yard. His cock had a mind of its own, pointing straight up toward his belly. Impossibly, it got even harder as she stared in silence at the mounting evidence that he was a spying, peeping-tom jackass.

He watched her tongue dart out to moisten her lips and she raked trembling fingers through her hair, effectively pushing it back from her face. "Um. I thought I was losing my mind when I imagined someone was watching me. Have you been coming here every night?"

"You are my mate, so yeah."

"Is that the only reason? Because you *should*? Or is it because you *want* to be here?"

Ringo moved closer, close enough that he could smell the clean scent of her. Intense emotion ran wild in his veins. Feeling dark and decidedly deadly, he stopped in front of her and cupped her cheek. "I think you know the answer to that."

Hunger poured over him like wine, taking him under as he finally gave in. Kissing her hard, tasting her untamed response was like coming home after years lost in the desert. Plunging his tongue deep into the warmth of her mouth, he gently devoured her, drinking her down bit by bit as she answered his claiming with a taking of her own. Edgy, provoked beyond anything he'd ever felt before, he reached for the band of her shorts and pushed until they pooled around her bare feet. Her panties followed them. He didn't give a damn about finesse when he grabbed the hem of her shirt and yanked it over her head.

Now he had her right where he wanted her.

Almost.

"Come to me," he said, his voice hard with lust. "Now, Rayne."

Before she had time to blink or to even breathe, he dragged her against him and lifted her up. As naturally as daybreak, she wound her long, sexy legs around his waist. She was wet! Gods! The wet folds of her pussy settled against his belly. It was enough to make a grown man cry.

Gripping her ass, holding on for dear life, he looked into her eyes. "I have to fuck you, Rayne. I'm dying here. Don't expect me to be gentle."

"Okay," she whispered as she pressed herself against his chest and wrapped her arms around him. Her nipples were tightly drawn and when she rubbed them over the muscles there, he sucked in a breath at the feel of her. He tightened his hold and headed toward the kitchen door. Lycans were creatures of the night and someone could come along at any time. Of course the way he was feeling right now, he didn't give a hot damn. But concern for Rayne had him pushing open the door then kicking it closed with a decided snap of finality.

He was sick to death of aching for her.

After all, a man could only take so much.

## **Chapter Five**

The kitchen was dark with only a pitiful bit of light coming in through the windows and he immediately banged his toe on a ladder-back chair. Cursing, feeling impatient and edgy, he grabbed it and sent it crashing to the floor with restrained violence. Rayne had doodads sitting on the table. With a swipe of his arm, he knocked them aside. If he broke something, hell, he'd buy her new stuff. Fucking her was uppermost in his mind. He wanted inside and he wanted it now.

Rayne hung on tightly. Her busy mouth and tongue stroked over his shoulder while her hands cruised his upper back.

His breath billowed in and out of his lungs as impatient lust raged through his veins. Her soft, wet pussy, pressed against his belly, made him insane to get inside her. Spreading her ass cheeks, he sent his pulsing cock up through the shadowy crevice and groaned. It felt so damn good, he pushed deeper, repeatedly. Ringo bent his head and nipped at her throat. If a consummation were in their future tonight, he would bury his teeth into her shoulder while he fucked her. Growing up, he'd heard the other lycans talk about the intensity of the experience. How could anything be more intense than what he felt now?

When Rayne writhed in his arms, he disentangled her legs from his waist and turned her belly down on the heavy oak table. "Don't expect gentleness from me," he whispered brokenly. "Not now."

"No. Please, Ringo. I'm aching."

His hands went to her ass and he stroked the globes firmly before sending his fingers into the drenched folds of her pussy. Finding her center, he shoved three fingers deep, fucking her that way until her wild cry broke free. When her cream coated his

fingers, his beast whimpered then howled as it clawed through his belly, eager to unleash itself. Growling low, he went to his knees behind her.

"Part your legs."

She did as he asked and the scent of her arousal crawled through his head in a sinuous dance. Her cunt was pink and glistening, unfurling like the most exotic flower. Ringo buried his mouth against the temptation he craved, sending his tongue deep into her channel. Rayne cried out, fueling his ardor, his need. Slowly, he licked her from pussy to anus, circling, circling before going back to feast on her cunt. His fingers found her clit. She was swollen there and pulsing, each tiny spasm beating just for him. Pinching, circling, he listened to the husky sounds she made and when he finally sucked it into his mouth, she screamed, coming against his tongue.

It wasn't enough.

Surging to his feet, he took his pulsing, hard cock in his fist and plunged deep to the hilt. Pausing to catch his breath as his heart pounded wild and fast, he took her hips in his hand to piston in and out, in and out. She squeezed her vaginal muscles repeatedly and that simple action threatened to send him over the edge.

"I couldn't stay away," he panted. "I couldn't. I'm a fool."

"Never. More, Ringo. Give me more."

Hard and fast, he gave it to her, loving every twist of her body, the way she pushed back against him, seeking more. Gripping her hips, he felt her velvety skin against his palms. Soft, sweet, delicious. He hadn't had those things in his life and his beast raged at the cruelty of it. He had it now though. Had it beneath his palms and pulsing around his cock as he thrust, bringing them both to the edge of pleasure.

Then they fell. Together.

Rayne stilled then drew a sharp breath. Her scream echoed in the small kitchen and the sound of it made Ringo's toes curl against the hardwood floors. Tensing, he dropped his head back as sensation zipped tiny arrows of pleasure from his balls to the

base of his spine. They raced up his back and over his scalp. His guttural groan joined her dying cries as he came long and hard, jetting his cum deep into her body.

Panting against her bare back, he settled his mouth at the nape of her neck. "Not done," he breathed.

Beneath him, Rayne was silent. Was she withdrawing from him already? He'd been too rough, too crude. His heart cried out at the expectation of the rejection that was sure as hell gonna come.

Withdrawing from her body, he stood and turned her, took her shoulder and pulled her to her feet. Staring straight into her eyes, he caught his breath. She wasn't looking at him with disgust or recrimination. Her eyes were shiny with tears. Her bottom lip trembled.

"Ah darlin'," he whispered. "You're breakin' my heart."

Without another word, he scooped her up into his arms and carried her through the darkened house. "Did I hurt you?"

"No."

He paused. "Where's your room?"

"Next door on the right."

Without a pause he carried her into her girlie room. A small lamp was shining on a bedside table, casting soft shadows across the creamy-white bedspread. Instantly he knew he was too big, and too damn unworthy to even dare step foot in a room like this. Gently, when it wasn't his nature, he settled her naked in the middle of the big bed and leaned over her. "I'm gonna ask you again, sweetheart. Did I hurt you?"

She drew a slow breath and then blinded him with a brilliant smile. Her eyes were shiny with tears. Ringo's heart lurched then squeezed tight. Slowly she shook her head. "No, I wouldn't lie to you."

"I'm sorry if I was rough but I've been dying for you."



"And I've been dying right back." Then miraculously, Rayne reached out and drew him down to her to whisper in his ear. "And I want more. Stay with me."

"That's all I needed to hear, darlin'."

\* \* \* \* \*

Cloverfield lycans were lined wall-to-wall in Joe McKinnon's study the following night as Silas MacAdam, the Supreme, stood before them. The council members were in attendance tonight, all leaders in the community and the strongest of personalities. They mingled easily with Joe's lieutenants who included Cactus, Manuel, and himself. Though Ringo had his suspicions about why Silas was here, it wasn't until the Supreme stood from his seat behind Joe's desk and began to speak that he knew for sure.

"Thank you all for coming," he began. He was a big man with strong features and a heavy Scottish accent. No lycan present would dare mess with the man. He emanated danger and authority. "My contacts here in America have talked with me over recent months about the threat of rogue lycan packs who are terrorizing our women and breaking our laws. Not long ago, another outrage was perpetrated here at the ranch. Thank the gods, no one was seriously harmed and those unmated females were returned to us."

Murmurs went up through the mixed crowd, both male and female lycans. Angus Poteet and his wife Betty, elders among them, were seated near the desk and he watched Angus reach for his mate's hand. His stern face was rigid with anger. Ringo expected him to speak but instead, Clyde McNair shot to his feet. "The bastards stole my girls and they are just teenagers. We got 'em back but I want their bloody hides for what they did."

The McNair girls had been rescued shortly after being taken but Ringo figured if he were their dad, he'd be just as pissed. He didn't blame Clyde a bit for demanding retribution. Joe stalked up to Clyde and settled a hand on his shoulder. "We'll get them, brother, and I promise you, they'll pay for daring to take your girls."

Murmurs in agreement went up through the group.

"This will not stand," Silas said, his voice ringing with authority. "Our rules, our laws have held us in good stead throughout these many centuries. We do not harm humans unless first attacked and we do not prey on each other. We do not murder or steal. To do so means death to the violators. Rogue packs have formed across this country and are particularly threatening in desolate land such as this."

Joe moved to stand next to the Supreme and sent his gaze out over the group, stopping to rest briefly on Ringo. At the moment he was propped against the wall on the far side of the room. Ringo didn't make a move but inside he tensed.

Fisting his hands on the big desk, Joe leaned forward. "The Supreme and I talked long into the night, folks, and we have a plan. Rest assured we will take out as many of the rogues as possible. We must control them or they will control us. Keep your ears to the ground and let us know if you hear anything at all or see anything suspicious in town."

With that, the group was disassembled and everyone left with the exception of Ringo, Cactus Mackey, Manuel Montoya and Gabriel Dunham, all of whom had been asked to stay behind. The Wolf Creek cowboys remained sprawled on a heavy leather couch and Gabriel, Cloverfield's sheriff, leaned forward in his chair. Like the rest of them, he was a big man. His sandy blond hair brushed brawny shoulders and his expression was grim. "I checked on the truck the rogues used when they took Rayne Poteet," he began. "Stolen from somewhere in Mexico. They'd replaced the tags. Ringo took care of them but we know there is a settlement of sorts across the border. A ragtag bunch that is seriously short on unmated females and I reckon they figure on taking ours to form their own pack."

"Zavalos was their alpha and he's dead now," Joe said with a narrowing of eyes. "'He was killed during the recent attack at the ranch. They'll be fighting among themselves for superiority right about now."

"Do you think Selena is with them?" The question came from Cactus, who, despite his deceptively lazy sprawl, was coiled tighter than a rattlesnake. Emotion swirled in his narrowed hazel eyes.

"You bet she is," Joe said. "I'd stake my life on it. Her goal has always been to mate with a pack's alpha. That's the only reason she focused in like a laser beam on me. She's the queen of the power trip. In her attempt to ingratiate herself with Zavalos, I bet she led him straight here."

Selena was strong, sexy and as dangerous as hell. She'd been Joe's lover and had hoped to be his mate. It wasn't to be. When things ended badly between her and Joe, she'd turned to Ringo and Manuel, who liked sex as much as the next man, and she was offering. Fucking Selena and sharing her with Manuel had been a mistake he'd lived to regret, especially when she'd shown up at the ranch and presumably orchestrated Rayne and the other two girls' kidnapping. Ringo slid his gaze to Manuel and their eyes connected. Yeah. He was also wondering what the hell had possessed them to get involved in heavy ménage action with the she-wolf.

She was nothing but trouble.

Joe suddenly turned to him. "Ringo, I'd like you and Manuel to infiltrate the rogue pack. You men have a history with Selena and the fact you'd turn rogue wouldn't be as suspect."

Ringo stiffened. "Guess you're talking about the fact my dad was an out-and-out traitor. Like father like son?"

"You know I don't believe that, brother." Joe stared him dead in the eye. "None of us here believe you are anything but honorable. The rogues won't know that."

Manuel stood and looked at them. "It's a good idea, Ringo. We've worked side by side for many years and every man here knows you. We don't blame you for what your father did. Hell, you were just a boy. Thing is, Selena doesn't understand honor. It would make perfect sense to her. She believes everyone is like her and wants nothing

but what they can take. It would make sense to her that you would want to be alpha of your own pack."

Ringo looked around the room and saw nothing but acceptance. Sighing, shifting his stance, he hooked his thumbs in the back pockets of his jeans and nodded. "All right."

Several hours later, Ringo drove with Manuel into town to set the wheels in motion for a staged defection from the Wolf Creek pack. It had to be believable and he knew it wouldn't be a stretch to convince some of the town's residents that Ringo Ramone was the spitting image of his traitorous father. The parking lot at Moondoggie's was packed with an assortment of big, badass trucks. Ringo found a vacant spot and braked to a stop. Moondoggie's was a honky-tonk just like a million other Texas bars with one exception, the place would be packed with lycans on any given night.

The local nightspot was a big, barnlike structure that featured a neon sign of a wolf howling at a blood-red moon. It hung over the front door to splash red, white and blue colors off the faces of anyone coming in and out of the place. A blast of hot wind sent a tumbleweed rolling across the dozens of trucks where it caught and bounced from several windshields before scuttling off into the night.

"Do you figure Rayne is in there?" Manuel asked into the silence that fell between them. "She usually shows up every ladies' night and has a drink or two with her friends."

"Why wouldn't she be there? You know as well as I there's nothing much to do around here."

Manuel turned his head and gave him a look. "Sure you want to do this in front of Rayne? She's your mate, Ringo."

"I know that!" Ringo snapped the words out on the back of a low growl. "Don't you think it's killing me to have her believe I'm a traitor?"

His friend huffed a breath and shook his head. "I think you should tell her what's happening."

"This has to be believable, my man."

"Don't you trust her?"

The air in the cab of the truck crackled with tension. "Of course I do," he said at last. "But her safety comes first. So does the safety of the pack. Our little show has to seem real in every way. There could be spies in the club." He looked over at Manuel, whose dark features stood out starkly in the shadows. "Leave it alone."

Manuel shook his head. "You should consummate with her, Ringo. Right now she's a target, a nice juicy target for those lycans. Do it now before we leave for Mexico."

"Back off, brother."

"You're being an ass."

"Maybe. My business and my decision." Ringo settled his hands on the steering wheel and flexed his fingers over it. "Maybe she'd be better off if we don't consummate."

"I can feel it," Manuel said. "You want to. You want her. And you know that among us there is only *one*."

"Yeah." He laughed bitterly. "What a fucking joke. Her one mate is a man who could bring shame to her family. When I first realized we were mated, I wanted to just beat the shit out of something. This isn't fair to a woman like Rayne. But now that I've tasted her, had her, I want nothing more than to make a life with her. I'm an ass, all right."

Manual fastened his eyes on the door to the club. "You're right. None of this is my business but I just want you to know that if something goes wrong once we're in the middle of those criminals, there's not another man I'd rather have at my back. I suggest you stop with the pity party and take the gift that life has handed you."

As they stepped out of the truck into the night and headed toward the crowded bar, Ringo thought about Manuel's words. She was a gift, all right. Too bad he might not get to keep it.

## **Chapter Six**

"You're awfully quiet tonight, honey," Quinn said as she settled her drink on the scarred table and leaned back to give her a considering look. "Did you have a fight with Ringo? Has he come to his senses yet?"

Tonight Rayne had met up with Quinn, Martha MacAdam, the Supreme's mate, and Alyssa Campbell to have a few drinks, listen to music and catch up on the gossip. Unfortunately, the gossip all seemed to revolve around her and Ringo these days and it made her darn uncomfortable. Pretty much everyone in Cloverfield knew that she and the moody cowboy were a mated pair especially after he'd rescued her that night weeks ago.

"This was a bad idea," Rayne said suddenly. "I shouldn't have come here tonight."

Martha leaned across the table and patted her hand. "Of course, you should've. After all what else is there to do in Cloverfield other than chill out with friends? Besides the guys have been meeting at the ranch. I'm actually expecting them to all come walking through the door at any moment now."

Rayne and Martha had been friends long before she became the consummated mate of the Supreme. She was a sweet woman, warm and funny, with empathic abilities and, without a doubt, Martha felt Rayne's current turmoil. She smiled in return and went back to dragging her index finger over a deep gouge in the heavy wooden table. She shook her head and sent her gaze out over the crowd of dancers. Cowboys and their ladies were two-stepping to an old Shania Twain song.

"Remember when I told you I felt I was being watched?"

Both women nodded.

"It was Ringo. I caught him lurking around my backyard last night."

Martha sighed. "That's so romantic. I know he has feelings for you and Ringo's emotions tend to run deep. Give him some time."

"Yeah, I know. He left early this morning without a word but I keep hoping that I've chipped away a little more at that armor he wears around himself."

Just then one of the cowboys from the Wolf Creek Ranch sauntered up and with a grin, swept her off to the dance floor. Alyssa was already out there dancing her boots off. Why not? There were so few unmated females around. Males outnumbered the females ten to one and what would a little dance hurt anything? Might take her mind off her current situation.

Harley and the Moondoggies, the local band, was taking a break but the stereo system in the place was great. Laughter and the occasional howl blended with the raucous music and soon Rayne relaxed and gave in to the party atmosphere of the place. The lycan she danced with was smooth on his feet and when he twirled her around and her sassy little skirt spun out and she laughed.

"Hey! Like those boots, Rayne," her partner observed.

They were red ostrich and fashioned to look worn and comfortable. Rayne grinned. "Got a whole passel of new boots in the other day. You should come by. Live a little."

"Might just do that." He spun her again and a pair of big, strong arms wrapped around her middle from behind, making her gasp.

*Ringo!*

She'd know that scent, those arms, those hands anywhere.

Rayne glance back over her shoulder but he paid her no attention. He was looking at the other cowboy. "Mind if I steal my girl for a dance, Buster?"

Buster smiled and tipped his hat to Rayne. "Hey, thanks for the dance."

As he sauntered off in search of another partner, Ringo grabbed one of her hands and spun her out and then back into his arms. Unable to contain her joy, laughter bubbled up. "You're pretty good at this."

"Think so?"

Impulsively, she went to her tiptoes and kissed one corner of his mouth. His slowly blooming grin made her insides melt. Moisture pooled in her panties as the scent of him wrapped her up, making her think of mussed bedsheets and the whispers of lovers. His teeth flashed white and warmth filled his dark eyes. Rayne loved him in that moment more than she'd ever thought it possible to love someone.

"You're looking mighty nice tonight, darlin'."

His compliment warmed her to the toes of her brand-new cowboy boots as they continued to dance. Then suddenly the song ended and another immediately began. The strains of Garth Brooks' *Shameless* whipped through the heavy air as Ringo pulled her close against his chest.

She rested her head there, loving the feel of his hard muscles beneath her cheek. Firmly he gripped one hand while she rested the other on his broad shoulder. Unable to stop herself, needing to touch, she sent her fingers on a foray through his long, silky hair. Ringo's other hand settled low on her back as he gently pulled her close enough to feel the heavy weight of his cock behind the fly of his jeans. Rayne caught her breath.

Sinuously, he glided her across the sawdust-covered dance floor and she knew dozens of eyes watched them but she just couldn't give a damn. In Ringo's arms was right where she belonged. Her breasts grazed the front of his black western-style shirt, causing her nipples to pebble tightly behind the confines of her bra. The irritating rub of lace against the tender buds was almost too much to bear. More than anything, she wanted to grab the sides of his soft-as-butter shirt and give it a yank, making those pearl snaps give way like a slow, seductive song. She wanted him to rip the tee shirt from her body and unfasten her bra to free her breasts. She needed his hands and mouth teasing her nipples. A raging fire of lust shot straight to her core and she felt the press of his erection against her pussy. Rayne panted softly against his chest and felt him stiffen. Placing a finger on her chin, he lifted until she was lost in the dark want reflected in his eyes.



"Let's get out of here," he murmured.

"Yeah."

Ringo led her through the crowd of dancers and toward the back of the club where Harley, of Moondoggie fame and the manager of the club, was passing long-neck bottles of beer across the ancient oak bar. "Hey Ringo!"

"Hey, Harley. Could I use your office?"

Harley barely paused before he nodded. "Sure. Help yourself."

Without another word, Ringo led her past the game room where a group of men were shooting pool. A long dark hallway displayed two restrooms marked *Cowboys* and *Cowgirls* and at the end was the manager's office. Ringo ushered her inside the well-lit room, shut the door with a snap and turned the lock.

Rayne caught her breath when he grabbed her shoulders and pressed her back against the hard wood. The look in his eyes was dark and predatory. She went still.

"Been wanting to do this since I left your bed this morning with the scent of you still hanging on my skin."

Ringo planted his elbows on either side of her head and leaned in to take her mouth with a voracious hunger that threatened to bring her to her knees. He sent his tongue deep to ghost the walls of her cheeks, her teeth. He tasted her fully and Rayne felt her body tremble as she tentatively returned the kiss. The dam of pleasure broke, roaring through her and with it came a confidence she'd never had before. Giving him stroke for stroke, she returned the kiss and sent her fingers on a slow, steady walk up the front of his shirt. Grabbing a handful of fabric, she gave it a yank and those pretty pearl snaps popped one after the other until his chest was bare.

Breaking free from the devastating assault of his mouth, she buried her nose against his chest and breathed him in. Busy hands played at the corrugated muscle of his abdomen. When Ringo sucked in a sharp breath, she smiled. The roar of the crowd outside the door muted to a low din. While they partied through the night, she was tucked away with her man and she figured life didn't get much better. Her lips and

tongue found a nipple and she sucked it gently before switching to the other. It wasn't enough. Not for her. Not now. Raking her nails over the firm flesh of his back, she kissed her way down his torso, teasing him with naughty little bites. Finally she dragged her fingers over his sides and lower, to cup him through his jeans.

"Ah yeah, Rayne. Honey, you're killing me here."

"Gods, I love how big you are. How long and thick. I want you. Now. I've never wanted anything so much."

Yes, she was brazen but she couldn't resist the temptation another minute longer. She was sick of waiting for him to make a move. It was time to take what she wanted and she wanted Ringo more than her next breath. By all the rules of their people, he was hers and being a shy wallflower, passive and restrained, wasn't going to help her a bit. Cupping his heavy balls through the soft denim pulled a low growling sound from his chest.

Oh yes. He wanted her. He wanted her now and she knew it.

Without warning he grabbed her around her rib cage and lifted her high and flush against the door. His jaw was rigid, a muscle working there. He leaned in and spoke against her lips. "Are you wet for me, Little Miss Rayne?"

"Yeah."

"Let me check. I wanna feel how hot you are." He dragged his erection repeatedly, slow and steady, over her pussy and Rayne's eyes closed as sensation ripped up through her body then down again. One leg lifted up to wrap around his hips as he dry-fucked her. When he rotated against her clit, she cried out, bucking against him. And then his hand was there, diving into the front of her panties to find her drenched folds. Unerringly, he found the swollen knot of her clit and gently squeezed it with his fingers. Rayne stilled and drew a breath to scream as he covered her mouth. She came undone against his hand.

Ringo let her slide slowly down the door and before she knew it, he had unzipped her skirt. It settled in a pool of color around the tops of her cute red cowboy boots. He bent down.

"Lift."

When he tossed the skirt aside and stood to look at her, she leaned down, intending to remove the boots.

"Leave 'em," he said, his lips quirking. "You look like a sexy, fuckable little cowgirl. My favorite fantasy."

Rayne smiled and stepped closer to settle her arm across his shoulder. "Well, just consider me your fantasy babe then. Whatever works."

"You don't have to work that hard. Believe me."

Ringo lifted her up and carried her to a couch across the room. When he set her on her feet, he reached for the snap on his jeans but Rayne stopped him. "Let me."

She unsnapped the worn jeans and slid the zipper slowly down, the sound loud in the sudden quiet of the room.

*Commando! Oh yeah!*

Lifting the heavy length of his cock into her hands, she dragged her hands over the firm flesh. So hard, so wickedly sexy. Ringo closed his eyes as she drifted her thumb across the broad head, collecting a single drop of fluid from the tiny slit at the end. Bringing her thumb to her mouth, she glanced up to see his narrowed eyes watching her as she licked the drop and smiled.

"You're killing me."

"Good. It's way past time someone rattled your cage, cowboy." Rayne reached out to push his jeans from his hips then she placed her hand on his chest and gave him a little push.

Ringo flopped onto the couch, his lips quirked up at the corners. His cock was hard and tempting, pointing straight up. "Give me a show, darlin'."

Tossing her hair for effect, she keyed in on the song that was currently playing and shimmied a little, wearing only her tee shirt, panties and those kick-ass cowboy boots. Doing a slow, sexy striptease, she let her hands drift over her torso then back up to snag the hem of her tee. Wiggling her hips, she pulled the shirt up and over her head before letting it fall to the floor. She snagged it on the toe of her boot and sent it sailing. Ringo laughed but then stopped when she reached for the snap that held her lacy white bra in place. Dancing backward, just out of reach of his hands, she unhooked it and let it slide off her shoulders and down her arms.

Ringo's gaze zeroed in on her bare breasts and she felt her nipples harden like diamonds, a tiny ache setting up in them, making them throb. "Come here, honey."

His low, raspy voice, the sheer power behind his words, made her tighten low in her belly. Moving close, she gasped when he settled his mouth over the indentation of her navel and nipped the spot. Moisture drenched her panties and she could've sworn he inhaled deeply before snagging the flimsy satin bow trim with his teeth. The world slowed to a lazy crawl as he pulled the panties down. Instead of trying to pull them off over her boots, he grabbed hold and ripped them off her body. Then with a growling sound, he grabbed her ass and pulled her to his mouth. He buried his tongue deep, sank it into her cream as if he were starving. He worked her over with his mouth, tasting, nipping, licking until her thighs began to tremble with reaction.

"Enough," he breathed against her quivering flesh. A shiver raced down her spine. "Fuck me, Rayne. Ride me."

"Yes."

Rayne grabbed his shoulders and came up on the couch to straddle him. Immediately he latched on to her nipple and sucked hard. Crying out, she grabbed his hair and held on as sensation whipped through her body, centering at her nipple then zipping straight to her pussy. Ringo drew the head of his cock through her wet folds.

"You're drenched. Wet. Damn, Rayne."

By the time he switched to the other breast, began to feast on the other nipple, she was mindless with need. She was empty and only Ringo could fill her. When he found her opening and pushed inside, she sighed with relief. He was impaled to the hilt but the sensation was so sharp, so wonderful she didn't want to move. She just needed to absorb it all. And then she couldn't help herself. Riding him slowly, up and down, she felt every detail of his hard cock, the thick head, the flanged notch at the base of it, every inch of thick male power. Swiveling, taking him, Rayne heard the sound of her breathing and felt her own meld with his. Every downstroke had her clenching vaginal muscles in an intimate caress that was simply irresistible.

"Oh yeah, sweetheart. That's it. Take it all. Take me."

Faster and faster she moved while Ringo thrust in perfect counterpoint. His hands gripped her ass, holding her closer, his teeth and tongue caught one nipple then the other. Rayne was completely open, her shields dropped as she absorbed each feeling, each humming sensation that soared through her veins. Then suddenly it was too much. With a low whimpering sound, she simply flew apart.

Ringo gritted his teeth and stiffened as he blasted his seed deep into her body. He pulled her close to him as he came and Rayne collapsed against him. Panting heavily, he set his face against the top of her head. She realized she'd never been more open to a man, more in tune. Without a second thought, she'd thrown wide her shields and let loose every emotion, need, desire, love.

A strange feeling suddenly swept her, chilling, intense. When she finally mastered her breathing, she lifted her head to look at him. Dark eyes that had been warm and full of passion, even laughter just moments before, were shuttered. His emotions were closed to her. After all they had shared since first acknowledging they were mates, he seemed as distant as ever. Maybe more so. Disquieted but struggling hard to hide her disappointment, she crawled from his lap and began searching for her clothes.

*What an idiot!*

She'd practically handed him her emotions like a gift but he'd given nothing back. His shields had been firmly locked against her despite their frantic lovemaking. She found her skirt near the door. Earlier she'd felt sexy and sassy but now she just felt dumber than dirt. Why had she thought anything would change between them? Her face burning, she struggled into her skirt but jumped when his hand settled on her shoulder.

"Here, let me help."

Rayne looked down and saw his clothing was in place. He held her bra and tee shirt. Fury swept her and she snatched the garments from him. "I don't need your help. What is it with you, Ringo?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. I opened myself to you and you just give nothing back."

Ringo scowled. "From the way you moved against me, sweetheart, it looked to me like I gave you plenty."

She whipped her bra and tee shirt into place and glared at him. "Get over yourself, Ringo. You've made it plenty clear how you feel about this whole consummation and mating thing but I'm getting mighty sick of your mixed signals. Tonight, just for a minute, I thought you were ready for this but you're not. Maybe you'll never be."

"Tell me what I have to offer you? Hm? What, Rayne?"

Her eyes burned but she'd be damned before she let him see her vulnerability. He stepped close and cupped her cheek. For just an instant his shields lowered and the power of his emotions almost sent her to her knees. Caring, compassion, concern. Love? Yes, maybe love of a sort but then he dropped his hand and the shutters slammed into place. Ringo opened his mouth as if to speak then seemed to think better of it. She could've sworn he was torn, almost sad. He stepped back. "Just remember that things aren't always as they seem."

Before she could respond, he opened the door of the office and settling his hand low on her back, stepped with her into the dark hallway. Something strange was in the air. Rayne slowed her pace but Ringo gave her an impatient look and propelled her forward.

The music had stopped.

Stopped?

Impending dread filled her up and Rayne pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. Moondoggies' was a loud honky-tonk. The music didn't just stop. Conversation didn't halt in a place like this for any reason. Just as they arrived onto the main floor of the club, she heard a deep, growling voice. Joe! It was their alpha.

"Where the hell is he? Where's Ringo?"

A low murmur ensued then stopped almost as quickly as it had begun. A shiver swept her spine when she glanced at Ringo and saw the feral glint in his eyes, the sharp set of his face. "What's going on, Ringo?"

"Not now," he replied. Then he steered her toward the center of the dance floor. No one was dancing. Only Joe, Silas MacAdam and several of the Wolf Creek pack stood there. "Lookin' for me, bossman?"

Rayne held her breath.

Joe advanced aggressively. His hands were fisted and his golden eyes burned like fire. "Thought I told you to get the hell out of town."

Ringo's lips lifted in a sardonic smirk. "Thought I told you to flat-out go to hell."

"You're not wanted here anymore, Ringo," Joe said. "Not after what you've done."

*What he'd done?*

Tension slithered, heavy and intense, through the room. Low growls went up to break the sudden silence. "You're no better than your traitorous father. If Bart hadn't taken him down in mortal combat, we'd have sent him packing too. Like father, like son."

"No. Joe, you can't do this!" Rayne hated the way her voice shook. This couldn't be happening. And Ringo? A traitor? Never. She'd never believe it. He might not love her the way she loved him but that didn't make him a traitor to his people. Anger and grief swept her but when she moved closer to Ringo, he gave her a derisive look and practically shoved her away.

"I don't need your protection, Ms. Poteet. Go back to your pampered, sheltered life. You can quit slumming now."

Rayne gasped at the verbal attack and then Joe advanced. Despite Ringo's public humiliation she stepped toward Joe and bowed her head. She drew her hair to the side and bared her neck in the ancient act of submission.

Gasps went up.

"Please, my lord," she whispered. "Don't do this. He has always been a valued member of our pack and he is my mate."

A heavy hand settled on her shoulders and she looked up to see not Joe but the Supreme.

"Come, lass."

She didn't think she could bear the pity she saw in his eyes. Rayne turned to look at her mate and saw that Manuel Montoya had moved to his side. A muscle worked in Ringo's jaw as he stared at her stonily.

"Ready to get out of here, my brother?" he said to Manuel.

"Yeah. Let's blow this joint."

"Get out," Joe growled. "I don't want to see your faces again."

Ringo gave her one last look and the coldness in his gaze chilled her. She didn't believe this. She couldn't. It wasn't possible that the man she'd fallen in love with would do anything remotely traitorous. But then Ringo spun away and, with Manuel at his side, left the building.



Standing in the center of the room, feeling shattered and more alone than she'd ever felt in her life, Rayne looked across the crowd and saw pity in the eyes of her friends. People she'd known all of her life, looked away in discomfort. Tears pooled and she jumped slightly when Quinn's arm went around her. "Come on, honey. Let Martha and me take you home."

Rayne was mortified as tears began to pour heavily from her eyes. "No. No. I'll get home on my own." She poured every ounce of contempt she felt into the look she gave her alpha. "What is wrong with you people?"

Despite Quinn's protests, she pulled free and dashed through the front door just in time to see the taillights of Ringo's truck fade into the distance. Desolation crawled up her spine to settle around her heart as she trudged the few blocks toward her shop and the sanctuary to be found there. Aching and suffering from an overload of emotion, she began to run. Her boots weren't made for it and she stumbled, falling to her knees. No doubt she was scraped to pieces but she felt nothing. Getting up, she continued, not noticing that blood ran in a steady stream down her shins. Rayne could barely see for the tears. She couldn't breathe.

Oh gods!

Her hands were shaking so badly, she barely got the key in the lock before stumbling through the door. The shop smelled so familiar, so comforting and she needed comfort right now. Woodenly, she locked up behind herself and made it into her apartment in the back. Stripping her clothes as she went, she immediately turned on the shower in the bathroom and stepped under the steamy spray. Mechanically, she scrubbed her face clean and washed her body. When the necessities were done, she leaned back against the wall of the shower and just let it all go. The pain. The loss. How wonderful it would be to be empty of everything right now, to be a machine and not be able to feel this terrible, awful grief.

Her eyes were raw and her throat was sore from sobbing when she went into her dark bedroom and pulled on a pair of shorts and an oversized tee shirt. Wanting

nothing more than to just crawl between her sheets, she turned but then cried out when a pair of arms went around her.

“Shh, *puta*! I’ve got you now!” Selena’s words were whispered in her ear. The she-wolf had been responsible for her and the others being taken weeks ago. She had been there running the show, shamelessly flaunting her crimes in front of the entire town of Cloverfield. She was a menace who wanted nothing but power and glory. Rayne tried to fight her grip but she was no match for the powerful lycan.

Selena laughed at her puny attempts and raised a glistening silver knife. “I’d love to slice that pretty face of yours, *chica*, but I’d hate to disappoint the fellas.”

“Bitch!”

“So they say. Don’t mess with me, Rayne. I have plans for you – and this time your lover isn’t here to save you.”

## **Chapter Seven**

Ringo and Manuel drove through most of the night until finally weariness pulled at them and they had to stop to catch a few hours of sleep. The utter desolation of the land he traveled through called to Ringo as he topped a rise on the highway. He understood the feeling and had lived it much of his life but never more so than now. Recalling the night before, he gripped the steering wheel, glad that Manuel was dozing over on the passenger side of the truck. He wasn't in a happy mood, to say the least.

Rayne.

He'd never had anyone go to bat for him like that before. Love for her caught him up, sinking tender talons into his heart. She must hate him now. Last night he'd had to close himself off from her for her own safety and it was the hardest thing he'd ever done. She'd been so open, so giving. Damn it. He'd never known a woman like her and to think he'd had someone like her for just a little while was the greatest gift he'd ever been given. What he really wanted was to take her to his bed and share the ancient consummation ceremony of his people. He wanted to be the lycan to help bring her into a new way of life. He wanted to keep her in his bed forever, tasting her, loving her. Building a future when he'd never been a man who believed he had much of one.

In the glaring light of day, he sent his gaze over the vast land stretching out before him. This stretch of highway was dotted with stone-white hills as far as the eye could see. One might think they were just regular tree-covered hills but that wasn't the case. Upon closer inspection, the dark green brush allowed glimpses of limestone that had been bleached like dead bones by the sun. Approaching the city of Del Rio, he looked out over Lake Amistad, one of the largest lakes in America. Beautiful, crystalline. The huge body of water was surrounded by a national park and shared its banks with both the United States and Mexico. He wondered idly if Rayne had ever been here.

Oppressive gloom settled over him like a shroud. He was as depressed as hell and he hated it. Reaching over, he nudged Manuel, who slitted his eyes open.

"We here?" Manuel's voice was gravelly from sleep.

"We're two miles out of Del Rio."

"What time is it?" Manuel asked on a yawn.

"About noon."

"Are we gonna drive straight into Mexico? Have you ever been to Acuna?"

Ringo shook his head. "Nope. Never been there. Cactus and Sheriff Dunham have already checked into a hotel just outside Acuna. I gave them a call while you were asleep."

Manuel sat up straighter and raked his fingers through his black hair. Their shared Hispanic heritage was apparent and would serve to make them more easily accepted by the rogue pack they were to infiltrate. They were the perfect choice for a little rogue hunting deep in the Mexican wilds. "Did Gabe figure out where they are?"

He stared over the hood of the truck and watched heat shimmer in waves off the asphalt pavement. "Yeah. They are out in the middle of nowhere. Camped about ten miles out of Acuna."

"What's the plan?"

As they drove through the town of Del Rio, Ringo laid it all out. "The bridge into Mexico is on the other side of town. Shouldn't have any problem with border guards. We're American citizens. Tourists come in and out all the time. We'll go in and meet with Gabe and Cactus and sometime tonight we'll become actors."

Manuel flashed a quick grin. "Hot damn! An actor! I'd sure as hell like to make the money some of those guys make."

Ringo snorted. "Yeah, consider this practice for if you decide to switch from cowboying to acting, *amigo*. We've gotta be convincing. This had better work because...well, hell."

"Because you are risking everything to protect the pack. You risk losing Rayne."

Silence fell in the cab. A weight the size of Texas settled on his chest. "Already have, my brother."

"I'm sorry. She'll forgive you after all this is over."

"You think?" He laughed, the bitter sound of it grating. "Maybe you didn't see the look on her face last night. I could've ripped her heart out and it wouldn't have hurt her as much."

"Did you see the way she bared her neck to Joe?"

"Yeah. Damn woman is something else, isn't she?"

Late that night, Ringo and Manuel located the abandoned RV park deep in a wooded area outside Acuna, Mexico. They'd spent much of the afternoon with Cactus and Gabriel, mapping out a plan of action. Cactus spent his days riding the range at the ranch and, as sheriff, Gabriel was often cruising the countryside in his truck. Most likely their absense wouldn't be noted by anyone.

They were to infiltrate the pack with Ringo challenging to become alpha of this ragtag bunch of assholes. When he and Manuel had them feeling comfy and cozy, they would call in Gabe and Cactus as backup and take the motherfuckers out. They wanted to catch the rogues off guard. Much easier and less dangerous that way.

In a clearing, they spotted a number of old mobile homes and recreational vehicles. Someone had built a campfire that shot orange sparks into the inky black night. In the distance, an owl hooted, lending its song to the creepy atmosphere. Nothing could be more isolated than this spot.

"Camped out like gypsies, aren't they," Manuel noted. "Think Selena is with them?"

"Betting on it. Praying for it. And you know I'm not a praying man. I'd like nothing more than to have her throat in my hands."

Manuel shot him a look, his eyes glittering in the dashboard lights. "I hear ya. I think Gabe's right. The fact we often shared her should make it easy to gain acceptance into the pack."

Once Joe McKinnon had made it plain he was done with her, Ringo and Manuel had been her lovers. They'd shared her together and fucked her on a solo basis as well. She hadn't been picky. For her, it was all about sex and getting off and she wasn't particular about the man. While they sat there, looking down into the wooded valley, Ringo's mind began to race but he needed calm for what was planned. They couldn't slip up and he had to be mentally sharp. Making a decision, he reached for his cell phone and hit Joe's number on speed dial.

Joe picked up on the third ring. "Ringo. Trouble?"

"Nah. We have a plan. Manuel and I are looking at their encampment right now."

"Good luck. The sheriff called about an hour ago. He and Cactus are just waiting on the go from you. They are good men to have at your back."

"The best," Ringo agreed. "Hey, uh, Joe?"

"Yeah, brother?"

"Any word from Rayne? Has anyone checked on her? After last night I haven't been able to get her out of my head."

Joe's deep sigh rumbled across the speaker. "She's something else, isn't she? Damn woman just broke my heart. Quinn has called several times and she's not picking up. I'm sure she's all right just licking her wounds."

Ringo flinched. "Do me a favor?"

"You bet. Name it."

"Could someone go over to her place to check on her? I've been feelin' really uneasy and I don't like it. I won't be satisfied until I know she's safe."

"Consider it done, Ringo. I'll head into town and check on her personally."

When they disconnected, Manuel gave him a look. "You're worried."

Reaching up, Ringo rubbed his head. "Yeah, I've got this buzzing in my ears and it won't go away. We haven't consummated things between us but I wonder if she's trying to tell me something telepathically. I've never been so connected to anyone before and, I'll just say, I have an uneasy feeling."

"Then let's get this show on the road so you can get back to your woman."

Ringo started up the truck and drove down the winding dirt roads into the valley where the rogues were encamped. Tension, anticipation hung heavily in the air of the cab. The first thing they noticed was a small band of lycans lounging around the big fire and each and every one stood when Ringo braked to a stop. He and Manuel got out of the truck and approached slowly, their hands in the air.

"We mean you no harm, brothers," Manuel said as the ragtag group began to radiate aggressiveness. But the word *brothers* made them stop in their tracks and look at each other. Now at least they knew they were dealing with lycans rather than just your average garden-variety humans.

"Heard you were forming a pack," Ringo said as they finally made their way to the clearing.

One lycan stepped forward and eyed him warily. "Maybe."

"We might be interested in joining up. I'm Ringo and this is Manuel. We just got kicked out of our pack because our alpha is too much of a pussy to take me on in a challenge. You hear me on that one, *amigos*?"

Several of the men grinned, some nodded. Looked like verbally trashing an alpha earned brownie points because pretty soon they were sprawled on the dusty ground talking around the blistering-hot campfire. Ringo watched the group of six men carefully as they seemed to accept Manuel into their confidence.

*Acting.*

Yeah, Manuel was good at that. He had them eating out of his hands. Ringo could tell they weren't quite so sure about *him*. He sensed they were a bunch of beta wolves

looking for a leader and Ringo was obviously alpha all the way. "You boys got a leader around here? What happened to your alpha?"

Conversation stopped. Either they were surprised he'd finally bothered to speak or they actually had something to say. Ringo wasn't sure which. The rogues hesitantly introduced themselves. Nervously they looked at each other until a lycan named Smith got up and reached into a cooler to extract a couple of long-necks. He tossed one to Ringo and popped the top on one for himself.

"Zavalos was his name. Got killed a few weeks ago when we raided a ranch north of here."

Manuel helped himself to a beer too and started tossing some off to the other men. Ringo knew Manuel was a deadly lycan but he was laying the good-ol'-boy act on as thick as molasses. "Not much of an alpha, if you ask me," he said before tilting the bottle to his lips.

The other men laughed.

"What'd he raid the ranch for?" Ringo asked when silence returned.

"Women, man! We need us some women."

"Yeah," another chimed in. "Can't have a real pack without some unmated females."

Ringo sent his gaze slowly over the group. "Got that right. You mean to tell me there's not a bit of pussy to be had around here?"

The men laughed at the crude joke. One of the men stood to stretch his legs and walked over to the nearest battered RV and leaned back against it. "Getting human women is pretty easy. We just head into a town and wait for the bars to close. Not hard finding someone drunk enough to not put up much of a fight."

Another guy laughed loudly. "Hell, I want 'em fighting. Fucking and fighting."

Ringo stiffened. Reports of attacks on human women were plentiful and he had a pretty good idea these guys didn't wait for a woman to say yes. They took what they



wanted, when they wanted it and didn't care about breaking the rules that governed them all.

"We've got us one woman though," The RV leaner said. "Selena." He spat on the ground near his dusty boot. "She won't fuck us though. She's holdin' out for an alpha and won't give us the time of day. Snotty bitch! She's the one who convinced Zavalos there were plenty of women in Cloverfield. She heard about a big shindig at that ranch and so a bunch headed out. Turned into a big mess that got a couple of our men killed."

Manuel looked over at the man who'd spoken. "What about Zavalos? Was he her lover?"

"Hell yeah, and then he got himself killed. Selena took off for a few days after that and then she showed up talking about revenge. Shit! That woman is plumb scary."

Ringo took a long pull of his beer. "Is she around?"

"Nah, she's been gone a few days but she'll come sneaking back into camp soon. Don't think she has anywhere else to go."

He didn't think so either. Selena had burned her bridges. She'd be feeling a little lost and desperate right about now and desperate people could do outrageous things.

Later that night, he and Manuel were shown to a trailer that had once been occupied by, oddly enough, the lycans he'd killed when saving Rayne weeks ago. There was no loyalty in these men. None. They didn't give a damn two of their brothers had been killed by some unnamed cowboy from the Wolf Creek Ranch. They were only sorry the unmated females had been returned to their families in Cloverfield.

"I think it's best we don't mention our connection to Selena right now," Ringo said, and he gathered up some trash from the old mobile home's living area. These men were pigs.

"Agreed. When she shows up there will be plenty of explaining to do." Manuel sat on the couch and removed his boots. "Think she'll be happy to see us?"

Ringo shrugged. "Who the hell knows what she'll think? She'll either want to fuck us or kill us. Doesn't really matter at this point. She's a dead woman. No one betrays the pack like that and lives to talk about it."

"Wonder if anyone questioned who took those rogues out. You know, the ones you killed when you saved Rayne?"

"They would have proof of nothing. We were out in the middle of the damn desert and believe me, I didn't leave any witnesses." Finished with the quick cleanup, he sat at a small dinette table. "I think we need to be ready to strike soon after Selena comes back into camp. She might have trouble believing we turned traitor, despite my checkered history. If she doesn't buy our story, it'll be an all-out battle, especially when we let her know we're taking her back to face the music."

"We have to be ready for anything."

"Yeah."

Seconds later the phone rang. Ringo checked the number and gave Manuel a glance. "Joe."

When his alpha began to speak, he went utterly still as horror churned through his belly. He hung up and turned to his friend. "Selena took Rayne. Stole her from her bedroom right after we left town."

"Fuck!"

Ringo tossed the cell phone on the table and rubbed his hands over his face. "Joe said Selena's scent was all over the place."

"Then Selena will be bringing her here. Hell, Ringo, Rayne can't even protect herself against that bitch."

"I know. Yeah, I know." Making up his mind, something soft settled into place in his heart. "The minute I get to her, I'm going to consummate and bring on her shift."

"Not a very hearts-and-flowers moment for her. Rayne deserves better."

"She sure as hell does, brother, but I promise I'll make it up to her or die trying."

\* \* \* \* \*

Rayne had never in her life felt so exhausted. She'd been trussed up like a Christmas turkey in the back of the old van Selena was driving for what seemed like several days. The windows in the back of the vehicle were blacked out and she'd honestly lost track of time. She was pretty sure they'd been traveling for at least two days, stopping only late at night when Selena was too tired to drive anymore. On those occasions, the she-wolf would get a room at a ratty motel and ask for one in the back. Both times Rayne had been yanked forcibly from the back of the van and marched into the room with the barrel of a gun jabbing the small of her back.

Gods, how she wished Ringo had consummated with her. By now she could have shifted and torn Selena's throat out. As she was now, she might heal from a gunshot wound or the slice of a knife but it would be much slower than what a fully shifted lycan could do. She hated feeling so helpless.

Selena was a powerful she-wolf, over a hundred years old. Rayne wasn't an idiot. She knew she was no match for her.

Since being taken, she tried so hard to connect with Ringo, to let him know she was in trouble. Despite everything that had happened, she just knew in her heart he would never desert her. She prayed that despite their being unconsummated, they were connected enough that he could feel her distress.

Selena never spoke to her, merely treated her as a piece of meat to haul around, but she quickly learned what was going on when two other females, both unmated lycans had been tossed into the back of the van. Like herself, they couldn't speak because Selena had placed tape over their mouths. Like herself, they were bruised and scraped from head to toe. All wore similar clothing, as if Selena had broken into their houses and stolen them straight from their beds.

The women were young but at least they were out of their teens.

Rayne had no idea where Selena was taking them but she had a pretty good idea they were destined to end up with the rogue lycans who were terrorizing the countryside.

*Gods! What a fate!*

She'd almost rather be dead than be taken by a lycan who was more beast than man. He could turn her and she'd be bound to him forever. A forced consummation was not only physical rape but a rape of the soul that could prevent her from ever being with the man she was meant for. It was Ringo she loved. It was Ringo she wanted. He was her destiny. Tears burned behind her eyes and she helplessly closed them as the van began to bounce along. Obviously they'd left a main highway and were in the country somewhere. Tensing, she glanced at the other two women. With their mouths covered, it was impossible to make out much about them except for the terror in their eyes. Rayne wished they could at least speak. They could reassure each other and try to find a way out of this awful mess.

Suddenly the van stopped. From the darkness, she knew it was the dead of night. A light went on as Selena stepped from behind the wheel. The back door was thrown open and before she could blink, she and the others were hauled out of the vehicle by several men. She didn't recognize any of them from the night of the barbecue at the Wolf Creek Ranch from where she'd been taken the first time. Unceremoniously they were carried through a maze of old trailer houses and RVs until they arrived at one on the edge of the clearing.

Each of them was carried into a separate bedroom of the mobile home and she was dumped like a bag of potatoes on a bed. The man who'd carried Rayne immediately left the room but Selena remained behind, glaring at her with eyes full of hate. She reached down and yanked the tape from Rayne's mouth, making her cry out in pain.

*"Shut up! Weak puta!"*

"Why are you doing this, Selena? You were one of us." Rayne's words were broken as she struggled to speak past her dry lips.

Selena smiled wickedly. "I'm doing it because I can, *chica*. I hate you all and if I could've taken more than you, I would have. I'll be the mate of the alpha of this pack once we have a new one and, as such, you will have to accept it. I think I'll enjoy having you subservient to me."

"What happens now?"

Selena laughed. "Soon you and your little friends will be selected by the men out there. They're hungry for women, and by supplying you, I will have earned their respect. They won't dare cross me after presenting such a gift."

Rayne didn't dare mention Ringo or the fact they were a mated couple. Like everyone in Cloverfield, she knew the rumors about Selena and Ringo being much more than friends at one time. No, she kept her mouth shut about that. She just had to hope that someone from home would discover she'd been taken and get here before it was too late. And Ringo? Gods! Where was he?

## Chapter Eight

Ringo was here wherever the hell *here* was.

She knew it. She could feel his emotions burning through her very bones. Rage. Worry. She'd slept solidly through that first night despite the aches and pains from Selena's frantic kidnapping spree. Maybe she was just so exhausted her body had shut down or something. Rayne figured she'd slept through most of the day. The trailer wasn't air-conditioned and the afternoon heat was stifling. The only solution to the unbearable heat was the bliss to be found in semi-cold showers. She'd already had two of them and sensed another in her near future.

Unfortunately, while she'd slept the sleep of the dead, the other women had been removed from the premises. She had no idea where they'd been taken and worry ate at her. Had they been given to the bunch of lycan males she could, even now, hear laughing and talking in the distance?

The trailer house was as dark as the grave with most of its windows covered with black tar paper that had been affixed somehow on the outside. The only window she could actually see out of was in the bedroom she'd been brought to the night before. Unfortunately, there was nothing but trees and shrubs as far as the eye could see. This place was like a jungle. Frustration ate at her. Surely there was some way to escape and she knew that if Ringo was here as she suspected, he would save her. But when?

At dusk, Rayne lay on the bed beneath a rattling ceiling fan as she sought relief from the heat. At least she was clean and the refrigerator in the kitchen contained a bit of food but the anticipation was killing her. Suddenly she tensed as the very air seemed to change. There was a quiet scratching sound coming from the screen at the open window. Rolling over the bed, she staggered to the window and saw Ringo looking in.

Damn, if he didn't look like an angel to her as he stood there, concern evident in his eyes.

"I can't stay long," he whispered as he leaned close. His dark eyes raked her from head to toe. "Are you hurt?"

She rested the palms of her hands against the screen and drank in the sight of him. "No, just banged and bruised up a little. I'm okay. Already healing. Get me out of here. Please."

Ringo settled his palms against hers with only that fine metal mesh separating them. "I need to explain."

"No, you don't. You'd never be a traitor to us—or to me. I couldn't believe that of you. Not ever."

He closed his eyes and the sigh she heard coming from him almost broke her heart. "Gods!"

Suddenly he lifted his head and looked around. "I can't stay. We're taking them down soon. One call and Gabe and Cactus will join us. Manuel is with Selena right now, explaining that we're here to join up with them. Figure he'll keep her occupied for quite awhile."

"You mean they're, um..."

"Yeah."

"No more talking then," she said. "I'll look for you. When?"

"Tonight."

"I'll be waiting. Be careful."

Ringo started to turn away. He'd risked so much to help them all and she couldn't let him doubt any longer. "Ringo?" He looked back over his shoulder.

"I love you."

Ringo's eyes swirled with emotion. He rested his hand on the screen once more. "I'll be back."

Later that night she heard raucous sounds through the bedroom window. Yep. The sounds of a bunch of drunken fools were unmistakable. It took a hell of a lot of booze to affect a lycan and again she worried about the other women. These men had already proven themselves to be nothing but criminals. Would the others be okay? Would they be in any condition to fight off inebriated, horny wolves? Closing her eyes, she prayed for their safety and wondered what was happening. Knowing Ringo was coming but not when was making her nuts.

After a while the din died down.

Ringo was coming to her. She felt it to the marrow of her bones and then he was there. At first she only heard the rustling of sound outside her window. She sat up in her bed and scrambled over in time to see a heavy razor sliding over the perimeter of the screen.

"I'm comin'."

"Ringo! Finally. I've been so worried, so scared."

The screen was pulled away and Rayne watched Ringo slither through the opening. There wasn't much room between the bed and the window so he landed in a heap in the middle of the mattress. She pounced, so relieved to see him, to be able to touch him. Everything that had happened before was just a nightmare that had no basis in fact. His arms went around her as she rained tiny kisses on his face and the corner of his mouth.

"Thank the gods you're here!"

Ringo rolled with her until she was pinned beneath him and despite their dire circumstances she grinned foolishly up at him. Tears swept the surface of her eyes and then he kissed her. Not a gentle kiss but one of possession and hunger.

Rayne opened to him, tasting his tongue as it brushed her own, thrusting it inside his mouth as she grabbed his long hair to hold him closer. Her breasts pearled, aching and tender, against his chest and unable to resist, she writhed against him as he deepened the kiss.



Finally he drew back and ran the side of his thumb along her cheek. "Listen to me, darlin'," he began. "We have to be quiet, careful and quick, but first I have to make a call."

*Quick?*

*What was he talking about?*

She didn't have time to wonder because, without another word, he sat up in the middle of the bed and tugged at his boots. Tossing them aside, he reached into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out a cell phone while glancing occasionally to the wide-open bedroom window.

"Gabe, it's me. I'm with Rayne right now and she's safe. Manuel is keeping Selena occupied at the moment and hopefully he'll convince her that we defected from the pack and mean to join her."

Ringo listened for a while, watching her carefully. Rayne didn't know what the plans were tonight but she had to get over this giddy excitement over his presence and pull her head firmly back on her shoulders if they were to survive what was to come.

"You men need to head this way. Most of this bunch is dead-dog drunk or heading that way fast. Hide out in the woods at a safe distance and I'll hit speed dial. The next call from me will be to tell ya'll to get your asses moving but I'll need a few hours."

Silence again from Ringo as Gabe spoke then Ringo cleared his throat. "I'm consummating with Rayne tonight before everything goes down. Yeah, yeah, I know. Not the most romantic of circumstances but I won't have her vulnerable tonight. She needs to be able to shift so she can either fight or get the hell out of here if she has to."

A thrill of anticipation swept her.

This was what she'd wanted, waited for.

Her heart tightened and her throat clogged with emotion.

Finally he hung up and tossed the phone aside. He stood at the side of the bed and reached for the hem of his tee shirt. The look in his eyes was downright mesmerizing and she found herself wondering if the gods had ever made a sexier man.

Kneeling in the center of the bed, she asked the question that was uppermost in her mind. "Are you doing this because you have to, Ringo? Or because you want to?"

He reached out, grabbed her and hauled her to the edge of the bed. Cupping her face, he stared into her eyes. "What do *you* think? Everything I said the other night was utter bullshit. It was a big show we devised in case there were spies in the club. It had to be believable and unfortunately you were humiliated in front of everyone."

"No!"

"Don't lie to me, honey. Yes, you were and for that, I'm as sorry as hell. I never want to see that look on your face again. It haunts me."

Tears filled her eyes but when she started to speak, he set his finger against her lips. "There's never been another woman for me, Rayne. No one I could love anyway. There's been no one I could give my heart to until you wandered into my sorry life."

"Oh Ringo."

"This isn't the right time or place but, Rayne, I have to ask you. Will you consummate with me tonight?" He looked around the cramped space with contempt. "I promise I'll make it up to you, sweetheart. You deserve candles and flowers and shit but—"

This time it was her turn to put her fingers to his lips. "Sh. It doesn't matter," she whispered. He certainly had a way with words. Candles and flowers and shit? Such a man! It took effort to keep the smile from her face. "The only thing that's important is that we're doing this. We're committing to a life together. I promise to be the best mate I can be."

Groaning, Ringo pulled her into his arms and breathed into her hair. "I don't deserve you. I don't deserve any of this."

"But you do. You're the man I love and I'm going to spend the rest of my life telling you how great you are." She pulled back with a smile. She wanted to linger over the moment but there just wasn't time. "Let me show you now."

Needing to touch him, she gently drew her hands over the hard contours of his chest, staying to linger over his washboard abs. Her lips and tongue found his firm flesh. She nipped the muscle at either side of his sternum while reaching down to cup his hard cock through the worn denim of his jeans. Ringo made a low sound and gripped a fistful of her hair and tugged her head back. "You're beautiful, Rayne. The prettiest thing I've ever seen."

"Aw, that's nice to hear considering I've worn these same clothes for a few days. I'm thinking maybe you are just partial to grunge."

Ringo smiled. "You smell pretty damn sweet though." He sent his fingers through her hair, catching up the damp curls and settled his lips at her throat. Licking, nipping kissing, he released her hair and grabbed the hem of the oversized tee shirt and pulled it off. Suddenly his hands were at her breasts, thumbing her nipples. Pleasure streaked from the hard tips straight to her belly to settle deep in her pussy. Moisture gathered like a slow-moving song between her legs and her vaginal walls clenched in anticipation. The memory of every erotic moment she'd spent with him in the past coalesced in her mind as he suddenly pushed her back on the bed and dragged her shorts and panties from her body.

Grabbing her thighs, he opened her fully and looked down at her. His teeth flashed white but it was only a semblance of him that she saw. Lupine teeth had elongated. He would bite her, take her, fuck her. Tonight.

"Take me, Ringo," she panted. "I can't wait."

Ringo unsnapped and unzipped his jeans and soon he stood naked, backlit by the moon filtering through the open window. He went still then seemed to come to a decision. "Don't move," he whispered.

She closed her eyes, considering her decadent and wanton pose, until he returned, to hold a folded cloth to her mouth.

"What?"

"Shh."

Quickly she realized it was a small towel from the bathroom. "We can't risk discovery, Rayne. Bite down on this because I swear to the gods I'm going to make you scream."

A chill raced over her flesh and she shivered as she bit down on the soft terry cloth. Immediately, he moved over her and took one aching nipple in his mouth. He sucked hard and bit the throbbing, aching peak. The tender scrape had her back bowing from the bed, her body tensing in expectation of more delicious pain. Sensation arrowed downward, zipping straight to her core. Restlessly, she lifted her knees capturing Ringo's big body between her legs. His rock-hard erection brushed her pussy and a sound broke free only to be caught in the fabric of the towel. The head of his cock brushed through the tender, wet layers and she heard him catch his breath before switching to the other nipple.

The torturous teasing continued as he licked, nipped and sucked at her breasts. He engaged her entire body, a true master. Over and over his cock rubbed her pussy until she wanted to scream her frustration. Suddenly Ringo released her nipple and came up over her on the bed. He removed the cloth from her mouth and bent to whisper against her lips. "Do you know what's going to happen?"

"Yeah. Mom told me. I know," she answered. "You'll fuck me deeply and while you are buried to the hilt, you'll bite me."

"And then?"

"Then the base of your cock will swell up and we'll be locked together."

"Damn, I wish I could hear you scream, sweetheart, but we can't risk it."

She gave him what she hoped was a reassuring smile but inside she was as frustrated as Ringo. She wanted every little experience of this night to be perfect, the way it was meant to be but that just wasn't possible. "Make it up to me?"

"Hell yeah."

Ringo moved his mouth from her throat to her breasts and then lower, tasting every bit of her skin as he went. When he finally bent his head to her pussy, she shakily bit down on the cloth just as a wild cry broke from her lips. The suctioning pull of his mouth was so amazing but when he scraped with his pearly lupine teeth she would've shot straight off the bed if he hadn't held her in place. A shock wave of pleasure ripped through her. He sent his tongue plunging deep and she convulsed around it, screaming out with a muted sound.

He kissed his way back up her body and, needing to touch him in return, she reached down to take his long, thick cock in her hands. Rayne squeezed and played, paying loving attention to his swollen, tender balls. With a low, rumbling sigh, he moved higher, giving her a better angle and she stroked him to her heart's delight. Her palm drifted over the thick, hot length and she sent her fingers to circle the flanged head, collecting the drop of semen that had settled on the tip. Carefully, she rubbed that single bit of fluid over the head and around the ridge below it.

"Damn, honey. I can't wait."

Rayne spat out the cloth and looked at him. She didn't want that damn towel. She wanted to cry out and let him know how much she wanted him. "Then don't. Fuck me, Ringo. Make me what I'm meant to be."

"A wolf."

She shook her head. "No. *Yours*. Make me yours."

With a low growl Ringo thrust hard and deep until he was seated to the hilt. The broad, thick head brushed her cervix. Impulsively she wrapped her legs around his hips to bring him closer. She didn't have the damn towel and she wasn't about to release the grip she had on his firm, delicious back. She'd bite her lip if she had to. And then he

began to thrust, long and slow, deep and hard. Every inch of her pussy pulsed and her vaginal walls gripped him, milked him. Energy of a kind she'd never felt before emanated from him to her and she realized it was a power he was transferring to her. As he thrust, rotating against her swollen clit with each downward stroke, she began to pant like she'd been running a race.

Pumping harder and harder, Ringo drew a deep, shuddering breath and Rayne saw those wicked teeth flash in the dark. Power surged through her body, unlike anything she'd ever felt before. Its momentum threatened to carry her across the bed but he caught her with a growl and continued plowing through the soft layers of her pussy until she thought she couldn't take it anymore. She tingled from the top of her head to the soles of her feet, and in savage frustration she scraped her short nails over his back.

His eyes changed from their normal intense black to nearly glowing with power. "Gods!" he gritted out. "Gods! Rayne, yes. You're mine!"

"Now, Ringo. Yes!"

The eruption hit her like a punch, the wild infusion of pleasure saturating her, speeding through her system like a supersonic jet. Ringo buried his teeth deep in her shoulder. The pain was instantaneous then gone in a flash but none of it mattered. Not now. Together they came and came, shattering and clutching each other through the storm. A scream rose up, her mouth opened but then Ringo's hand was there to dull the sound. Once she'd settled, he shoved the cloth back between her teeth. "Hang on to that, Rayne. You're gonna need it."

His cock was thick and swollen, lodging firmly, deeply in her pussy. He rotated against her clit, making her gasp, and his sudden grin was feral. He wore a look of possessive pride on his face. "Damn if I'm going to rush this."

She smiled, stroking his back and the deep gouges that were already healing in the way of their people. She thought of his cock lodged deep, swollen and hard, and closed her eyes in bliss. "No hurry, sweetheart. Take all night if you need to. You won't hear me complaining."

His laughter was low and rich. He continued at an excruciatingly slow pace but Rayne didn't care. She was Ringo's now and that was all that mattered.

## Chapter Nine

Before leaving the mobile home in the predawn hours, Ringo kissed his mate and stared into her eyes, hoping like hell he could keep her safe. Earlier she'd shifted into a medium-sized but very beautiful russet-colored wolf. She wasn't as big as the lycans waiting outside their sheltered cocoon but he figured, with a little help from him, she would hold her own.

"Stay close to me, *mi ciela*," he whispered, calling her his darling. He cupped the delicate curve of her cheek and kissed her. "Don't want anything to happen to you. Don't think I could stand it."

She nodded, smiling. "I'll stay close, I promise. No heroics. I just want to get these creeps and find the other two women."

He'd already called the sheriff and Cactus and they were currently waiting for the action to start before they would join in, routing the rogue lycans. From the beginning, he and Manuel were to infiltrate in order to determine how many rogues were part of this ragtag pack and whether or not they were heavily armed. At the moment, Manuel was outside with Selena, who was their primary target. She was a traitor. He could hear their voices blending with the occasional snores of the men who'd passed out around the campfire sometime during the night. Knowing the lycans would be vulnerable, he squeezed Rayne's hand and waited for Manuel's signal.

"Where the hell is Ringo?" Manuel yelled out as if extremely aggravated.

Ringo grinned, suddenly eager to have this business done. "That's our cue." He looked at his mate. "Ready, darlin'? The sooner we get this done, the sooner we can get back to more important stuff."

He stepped with Rayne outside and together they moved through the maze of trailers and RVs until they stood at the very edge of the clearing. Across the dying



campfire on the other side, he spotted Manuel striking a deceptively relaxed pose next to Selena. With his hip cocked, looking like he'd stepped straight from the shower, he looked like a man who been happily fucking all night. The beautiful but poisonous Latina she-wolf stood next to him, eying the half-dozen sleeping lycans with contempt. Several were naked and others were still in wolf form and Ringo suspected they'd done some drunken hunting of the game that was plentiful in the area. Finally Selena looked up and gave him a slow, seductive smile. "*Hola, querido*. So glad you could join us," she crooned, and then the smile on her lips died and Ringo knew Rayne had moved to his side and into view.

She growled low and pointed her finger. "What the hell is going on here?"

"Consider it a coup, sweetheart."

Selena jerked and yelled out as Manuel grabbed her arms and yanked them behind her back. She kicked out but it was no use. "The little game you're playing is over, *chica*. You are so busted," Manuel said.

The men, hearing the sounds of raised voices, slowly started to rouse and then Gabe and Cactus ran from the shelter of the woods. The two men were heavily armed, looking like at least two horsemen of the apocalypse. Ringo reckoned he and Manuel comprised the third and fourth. Cactus paused briefly to toss Ringo a rifle. "Figured you might need this."

"Thanks."

Gabe grinned and pointed a rifled at the head of the first rogue who'd jumped to his feet. "Brought company, brother."

Ringo looked up, surprised when at least a dozen men from the Wolf Creek Ranch stepped into the clearing, their rifles raised. Joe McKinnon was in the lead.

Selena was screaming her head off, cursing in a string of rapid Spanish, trying desperately to break free so she could shift but Manuel and now Cactus had her well in hand. Joe walked up to his old lover and gave her a contemptuous look. "The game's over, Selena."

"Please, Joe! You loved me once."

"No, Selena. Never."

"Ringo!" she called. "Ringo, we were lovers! Please."

He shook his head. The woman was delusional. "That was a long time ago, Selena. It was fun and games with us and you know it. Besides," he reached out and drew Rayne against his side, "I have a consummated mate. Time to settle down, ya know."

Selena screamed, her face fiery red with her anger. "*Put a! Whore!*"

She yelled the curses at Rayne, who simply lifted her chin, refusing to exchange barbs. It was all over in a matter of minutes. Ringo felt a sense of relief at the lack of violence as the others rounded up the rogue lycans with barely a whimper from them. They were a weak bunch.

Rayne looked up at him with worry sharp in her eyes. "We have to find the other two women. I don't know where they were taken."

He looked around as several big vans pulled to a stop at the edge of the clearing and the cowboys began herding the criminals into the backs of the vehicles. Their hands had been tied with heavy duty rope and tape and of course, the rifles pointed at their midsections, helped things along too. "I figure it's safe now. Let's go get them."

Rayne led the way with him, Joe and Cactus following. They began a thorough search of the filthy trailers until Cactus yelled out. "Over here!"

Everyone headed off in a run toward the sound of Cactus' voice until he and Rayne stepped into the mobile home and spotted the two women huddled together on the couch. Rayne rushed up and gathered the unmated females against her. "It's okay. You're safe now," she said.

Ringo shared an uncomfortable glance with Cactus. Women's tears made most men downright uncomfortable. They were big, tough lycans but give them a weeping woman and they were almost helpless.

*Pitiful.*

While his mate spoke quietly with them, getting their names and other information, he overheard each relate they hadn't been molested in any way by the men who were now in custody. He watched Cactus' gaze narrow, focus in on one of the women. A mop of tangled, curly, blonde hair framed a delicate face. Her green eyes were wide and firmly zeroed in on Cactus. She had a long scratch down the side of her face but didn't seem to notice as she shivered under Cactus' sharp gaze.

*Hm. Interesting.*

Rayne looked back over her shoulder at Joe. "They don't have a pack, Joe. Selena and the others must have scouted all over the state for unmated females. Sarah and Kate are sisters who have been living among the humans in a small town in east Texas. They have no family and belong to no pack. Basically they are orphans."

"No longer."

Rayne moved back to Ringo's side and took his hand as their alpha moved to stand before the females. The women didn't shrink from him but faced him with eyes wide open. "Do you want to come with us, ladies? There's a whole town of us not far from here. All good lycans who abide by the laws of our people, and in those parts, I am the law. You'll be most welcome. Do you vow your allegiance?"

Tears filled their eyes as they shared a glance. Finally they looked at Joe and stood. Immediately they started to drop to their knees, baring their necks, but Joe's hand on their shoulders stopped them. "No need for that. A simple yes will do."

\* \* \* \* \*

Rayne sank back against her mate's muscular chest and sighed as the warm, bubbly water swirled around her. Candles flickered on every flat surface of her bathroom, complements of Quinn and Martha. Other members of the Cloverfield pack had chipped in too. Flowers decorated her entire house and the scent of them was everywhere.

"I can't believe they did all this," she said, smiling over her shoulder at her husband. His long hair was wet, hanging past his shoulders and drops of water clung to his thick black lashes.

He grinned at her and filled his hands with her breasts, thumbing the peaks lazily. "Smells like a damn funeral parlor."

"Shush! You are so bad." Playfully she turned and flicked water at him before resuming her comfy position. His legs were splayed on the outside of hers and she couldn't resist temptation. Reaching beneath the water in the tub, she ran wicked fingers over his firmly muscled thighs. His heavily erect cock prodded her ass and she wiggled against it, making him groan. "They wanted to make things right for us, Ringo. You know that, don't you?"

"They don't owe me a damn thing."

"Oh yes, they do. Those rogues would have continued to plague every decent pack in the state if you and Manuel hadn't infiltrated them. What you did was very brave."

"I don't want to talk about that."

She laughed lightly. "Oh yeah? What do you want to talk about, cowboy?"

"Think I wanna talk about how sweet your nipples are and how much I love fucking your pretty pussy."

"Mm. I like that."

"Figured you would but first, let me take care of you," he said gruffly. Before she realized what he was up to, he'd carefully moved her farther down in the tub and laid her back into the water. Bubbles swirled over her nipples as they broke the surface and she sighed at the feel of his big hands moving through her hair. Then suddenly she was lifting back against his chest again. He poured her favorite scented shampoo in his hands and lazily began to wash her hair.

"Ooh, this is delicious. It reminds me of that night at the line shack when you took care of me."

"I like taking care of you."

"Really?"

"Yeah, hang on. Time to rinse."

Ringo settled her down in the water again as he swept the suds from her hair. His fingers trailed through the strands then found her tightly pearled nipples. One forefinger delicately traced one and then the other. A trembling sensation drifted through her body, making her pussy ache. But she wasn't in a hurry now. Not like last night when things were frantic and rushed. Never again would it be that way unless they wanted it to be so. For now she wanted to savor every moment of this beginning with him.

He took her shoulders and tenderly lifted her, but this time, instead of lying back against him, she turned in his arms and settled her lips on his. "I love you, Ringo. Are you happy."

His eyes were solemn and more beautiful than anything she'd ever seen. "Hard to imagine a man like me ever being happy but yeah, I am. I never told you this but I'd wanted you for a long time. You were just so damn sweet." He shook his head and frowned. "Didn't figure a man like me deserved something so fine."

"Ringo listen to me carefully," she said, taking his face in her hands. "You aren't responsible for what your father did. You were just a boy and I swear to you, no one in this town believes it either."

"My own mother didn't want me."

"Bullshit! Ringo she was distraught, deeply disturbed. Again. You weren't to blame. We aren't responsible for the actions of others but know this, mate of mine, I will never betray you and I'll honor you forever."

He smiled slightly. "Don't know what I did to deserve you."

Wanting to lighten the mood, she moved more fully toward him until she was straddling his lap. His fat, yummy cock rose between them to rub tauntingly on the

swollen lips of her pussy. She sank her lips against his throat, collecting drops of water with the tip of her tongue. "Guess you'd better keep me plenty happy then, huh?"

"Reckon so. How am I supposed to do that? Hm?"

"Fuck me well and often. Gotta feed this raging beast that lives inside me."

"A raging beast, huh? I like the sound of that." He thrust upward suddenly and Rayne caught her breath as he brushed her clit. His hands gripped her ass and he hauled her closer. They moved together that way and despite the fact they were in the water she felt moisture rain from her pussy. A low moan swept past her lips and then he teased her further by dipping his fingers into the cleft of her ass cheeks. Ringo settled his mouth against her forehead and circled her anus with one finger. He pressed the rosette bud and Rayne caught her breath. "I want to fuck you here. I want to send my cock into your delicious ass. That okay with you?"

"Mm. More than okay."

"First this."

"Yes."

Ringo lifted her until her breasts were pressed against the muscular mounds of his chest. His fingers found her pussy with unerring accuracy and he sent them deep. Rayne cried out but it wasn't enough, not nearly enough. He finger-fucked her until she squirmed and water lapped the sides of the tub. Shadows danced across Ringo's rugged beauty and her heart thudded with the thrill of being able to finally call this man her own. Reaching down, needing to touch him in return, she took his cock in her hand and squeezed lightly.

"Damn, woman! Fuck me. Ride me, Rayne."

He removed his fingers and slid her onto his cock. He sighed raggedly when he was seated to the hilt. "Gods!"

Up and down she slid with agonizing slowness and then he joined her, meeting each parry with a thrust of his own. He wrapped one arm around the base of her spine

and Rayne leaned back over it as he sucked her nipples so hard she thought she'd come instantly. But she didn't. Holding back, saving the ultimate pleasure, was one of the hardest things she'd ever done.

Repeatedly she settled over his erection, squeezing, milking him hard with her silky vaginal muscles, wringing low sounds from the lips of her mate.

*Yes. Yes. Yes.*

Pleasure caught her up and soon her cries joined his as she stiffened then flew apart. Ringo soon followed and then she fell, panting, against his chest and his hand fisted in her hair.

Later, clean, dry and momentarily sated, they sat naked together at the table in her kitchen. The ladies from Dixie's Deli, a local takeout food joint, had come in sometime before they'd returned to Cloverfield and had placed a beautiful white linen cloth on the table. The town was so populated by bachelor lycans, they did a booming business. Thick steaks were warming low in the oven along with a dish of scalloped potatoes. A crisp salad waited in the fridge for the moment they decided to eat a bite.

"Could you light the candles?" she called as she donned an oven mitt and began to remove the food. Soon candlelight flicked over the beautiful place settings.

*Very fancy.*

Ringo joined her in serving the food and once he'd poured them both a glass of the red wine that had been breathing on the counter, they sat and enjoyed their first fancy meal as a mated pair.

She speared a bite of rare steak with her fork, waving it as she spoke. "I hope you don't think we'll eat like this every night, cowboy. I'm a hell of a shopkeeper but not much of a cook."

He grinned, grabbed her hand and snatched the bite from her fork. "Figure I'll survive."

While they ate, they talked of her childhood and his. Once again she realized how lucky she'd been. Her parents had loved her and no, they weren't selfish as Ringo's had

been. Her heart expanded as she recognized that she wanted to be everything to this man.

His heart, his future, his comfort.

When they cleaned up afterward, Rayne reached into the fridge and spotted a small white cake box. Unable to resist anything that was beautifully tied with a sweet red bow, she removed it and carefully unwrapped it to find a tiny chocolate cake. A card in the box read *Happy Consummation! Enjoy!*

Delighted she turned to Ringo and saw humor dancing in his eyes.

"It's beautiful," she said.

"Not as beautiful as you. Or as delicious, I suspect."

Love for this town, these people and her mate filled her with a trembling joy that she'd never known before. Carefully placing the tiny cake on a plate, she grabbed a fork and looked at him. "Come on. Let's have this in bed."

Seated in the middle of her turned-down bed, the lovely cake between them, Rayne watched Ringo reach for a long-stemmed red rose some romantic soul had left lying on a pillow. He took it and reached out to drag the silky petals over the tip of her breast. Hunger of another kind took hold. The petals drifted over her collarbone and down her center until they prodded lightly at the lips of her pussy.

"Ringo," she whispered, closing her eyes.

"I'm right here."

"I want you. Want to taste you."

"Come and get me, darlin'."

The wicked sexiness of his voice whipped through her and as he set the flower aside, she dipped her finger in the creamy chocolate frosting. She spread a dollop over the head of his penis. "Mm. I love chocolate."

"Dear gods!"



Bending to him, she drew her tongue over his tightly muscled abs and took his cock in her fist. Squeezing and releasing the base, she trailed her tongue hungrily over his chocolate-covered penis and lapped it up, tasting the candy and him. When she glanced up, she saw his eyes were closed. Rayne gave him a gentle shove and crawled up between his sprawled thighs so she could more easily work him over with her lips and tongue. "You are delicious, my man," she whispered against the head of his cock. Sucking gently, then with more force, she drew her hands over the thick stalk, tracing the heavy veins, learning him.

"Take me."

"Yeah. Okay." Rayne opened her mouth over him and took him deep. Sucking him, drawing on him was a provocative experience. "I think we should do this a lot. What do you think?"

"Hell yeah. Aw, Rayne."

Finally speech was impossible as she licked and sucked his cock. She felt him go still, thought he was on the verge of shooting his semen into her waiting mouth but then he surprised her. Growling low, he caught her up and sent her sprawling upon the bed.

Rayne laughed.

"You'll pay for this," he said, grinning. Flipping her quickly onto her tummy, he yanked her hips high and positioned her knees on the bed. Carefully, he reached out and widened her knees, placing her body exactly as he wanted it.

Silence fell.

He was looking at her. Just looking.

"Your pussy is glistening. You're so wet it's on the insides of your thighs. Beautiful."

Rayne opened her mouth to speak but there were no words. They froze on her tongue as he dipped his finger deep in the drenched folds of her pussy. "Gonna taste some of that chocolate, darlin'," he drawled.

*Oh my gods!*

Tense and waiting, she felt movement behind her and knew he was gathering frosting on his fingers. She jumped when he began to spread it on the lips of her sex and over her throbbing clit. Anticipation curled low in her belly, rolled through her thighs and tormented the tips of her breasts. And then his mouth was on her cunt, eating the chocolate like the greatest of connoisseurs. He slid his tongue over her swollen lips and then spread them open while he dined at her clit. It was too much and she came with a low cry.

His breath soughed over her folds and a shiver of pleasure swept her body. His voice was dark and edgy with lust. "Do you have some lube?"

"Bedside drawer."

"Stay where you are."

Waiting on her hands and knees in the middle of the bed, she watched him go to the drawer she'd indicated and take out the unopened tube of lubricant. His eyes were trained on her as he squeezed some into the palm of his hand and worked the stuff over his big cock. Rayne swallowed a deep moan and then he was behind her again.

"You have a virgin ass, Rayne. I'm going to get you fixed up here. Are you ready for this?"

"Yes!"

He'd coated his fingers with lube again and pressed his fingers gently at her anus. Circling, circling, circling. Rayne tensed as he slipped the tip of one finger into her tightly puckered opening.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. More."

Slowly he slid the finger just a tiny bit deeper and the intense feeling of fullness made her go completely still. Dark pleasure, deep desire caught her up and her heart started to pound hard in her chest. She wanted everything with Ringo, every bit of pleasure there was to be found.

His other big hand rubbed gently over one ass cheek as he sent the finger farther, deeper. Ringo stroked the base of her spine. "Relax, darlin'."

She was speechless at the delight that filled her up, spiraling slowly through her belly. He moved his hand from her back and teased her clit until helplessly, she backed up against him. "Gonna add another."

"Okay, Ringo. Yes."

Tentatively, he added another and once she was completely filled, he moved them apart and together. She'd never known he was such a patient man because he spent many minutes stretching her and then finally he removed his fingers.

The instant emptiness had her backing against him and Ringo soothed her by pressing tender kisses to her ass and lower back. He stroked his hands over her thighs to gentle her and then suddenly she felt the head of his cock press her there in that virgin place. "Gods, Ringo. Yes."

Slowly he entered her. Slowly. Slowly. Once he was seated deep, a low burning began. Dark and decadent as the chocolate he'd eaten from her drenched pussy. Moving through her body, he whispered his love. He told her of his need.

Caught up in the intimacy of the act, Rayne joined him in the dark dance. His fingers played at her pussy as he thrust, gradually increasing the pace. She wanted more. She wanted it harder, deeper.

Then finally Ringo went still and with a low groan spilled his cum deep in her body. Rayne's own orgasm was stronger than hell as she clenched around his cock with violent spasms.

Together they collapsed on the mattress. Ringo's heavy weight at her back was delicious but then he pulled out of her body and moved to her side. The parting was

brief and Rayne soon found herself snuggled tightly against his hot body. Her hands swept his back and played along his trim waist.

After a moment Ringo pressed a kiss to the top of her head as several wolves howled in the distance. She went still and looked up at him. The expression on his face was grim.

"What's happening?"

"Don't worry about it, sweetheart."

"Tell me. You don't have to protect me anymore. I'm a full-fledged she-wolf now."

Ringo sighed and looked at her. "Reckon the rogues are getting a taste of pack justice. They were all meeting at the ranch tonight. Had to do it tonight since the Supreme is leaving tomorrow. He wanted to see that justice was met."

A shiver raced up her spine as she thought of the ancient ritual. Criminal lycans were given a thirty-minute head start and then the others would shift and give chase. Pack justice. Rayne shuddered and part of her hoped the men and the single woman who'd broken their laws might gain their escape tonight. Then she thought of the terror and carnage they'd left in their wake and quickly changed her mind.

"Don't think about it," Ringo said. "It's out of our hands. It was out of our hands the moment they began to prey on the innocent."

"At least it's a fair fight. I mean, it's a battle to the death but it will be honest. One lycan fighting another."

"It's the way of our people, darlin'. Once a crime against humans is committed, it draws attention to us. We can't have that."

"I know. It could mean our destruction." Rayne released a breath.

Ringo came up on an elbow and leaned down to kiss her lips. "Let's not think of this. This is our consummation night, Rayne, and I want everything perfect for you."

"It has been. I love you, Ringo. I'll continue to love you."

Ringo leaned close, his smile open, his eyes filled with absolute certainty. "And I love you, Rayne Ramone. Always have. Always will."

His words made her heart soar. And as he kissed her with a gentleness she would never have expected from her rough lycan mate, she gloried in the adoration she felt sweeping from him to her. It lifted her up and gave her strength. Yeah, she might be part wolf but she was wholly a woman. Thanks to Ringo and his love.

## **About the Author**

Regina Carlisle is an award-winning, multi-published author. She likes writing that is hot, edgy and often humorous, and puts this trademark stamp on all of her stories. Regina lives in west Texas with her husband of 25 years and counting, and is a doting, fawning, over-indulgent mother to her two kids. When she's not penning steamy erotic tales or hot contemporary stories, she's indulging in long chats with friends who help her stay sane and keep her laughing.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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