

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT

Coyote
Run

RHIAN CAHILL

ELLORA'S CAVE
Quickies®

Coyote Run

Rhian Cahill

Prequel to the Coyote Hunger series.

Forced to make the heartwrenching decision to leave Whispering Mountains, Rowan Wilder isn't about to go without securing her bond with Quinn MacClellan. Neither expected their first time to be on the forest floor or while running to escape a madman but when it comes to claiming their mate, nothing can stop the hunger from burning out of control and consuming them both.

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COYOTE RUN

Rhian Cahill

Dedication

For those who love the coyotes as much as I do.

For Grace, just because you always go the extra mile.

For Kelli, who never fails to amaze me. I'm in awe of your greatness.

And for the man who rocks my world. Together forever.

Chapter One

The thump of paws hitting hard ground echoed off the valley walls, twigs snapped and leaves were crushed in the mad dash through the forest. Adrenaline pumped through veins pounding with the exhilaration of running free. Rowan loved to run in coyote form but tonight wasn't any old frolic in the woods. Tonight was about escape.

Quinn raced beside her, his beating heart and heavy breaths a welcome comfort. They ran together, darting between trees and through the underbrush as they made their way over the mountains. Speed was important. Quinn needed to be back in Whispering Springs before morning or questions would be asked too soon. Rowan needed to be far from home before anyone discovered her missing.

Her injuries from Marcus' attack were quickly repairing but she still felt dull aches rippling through her muscles. She leapt over a fallen log and the pack strapped to her back shifted to the side, throwing her off balance. Rowan stumbled, her front paws losing their grip in the slippery debris of rotting leaves littering the forest floor. The ground rushed up to meet her and pain exploded in her head. With a yelp, she crumpled to the dirt.

"Rowan!"

Quinn had shifted back to human form and was on his knees beside her, the strap of his pack digging into his bare chest. He ran his hands along her fur-covered limbs, her side and over her skull. His fingers gently probed for any injury. Rowan panted for breath and waited for the dizziness to fade before she changed from coyote to human.

"I'm okay," she gasped. "Just winded."

He reached for the snap on her pack and flicked it open. The tightness in Rowan's chest eased slightly and she drew in a deeper breath as the bag fell to the ground behind her.

"Thanks."

"We'll rest here for a bit." Quinn removed his own pack and placed it beside them.

Rowan pushed off the ground and sat cross-legged, her uncovered ass connecting with the cold floor. Her body protested the move but she didn't have the luxury of being a wimp tonight or ever again for that matter. She dragged her bag closer, unzipped it and pulled out a water bottle. With a flick of her wrist, she popped the top and took a couple of gulps before handing it to Quinn.

His hand wrapped around hers but he didn't take the container. Rowan looked up to find him staring at her. The naked longing swirling in his gaze heated her blood and called to her coyote. Already close to the surface, her beast answered with a call of her own. Need and want zapped through her. Quinn's hand shook, the fine tremors vibrating along her skin in an electric wave that made every instinct she had scream with desire.

He squeezed her fingers before he removed his hand with a growl. "Damn, I want you."

Rowan watched the struggle he waged inside, every emotion crossed his face as he fought to gain control. She knew Quinn was trying to hold back for her benefit but she didn't need his protection. She needed him.

Before she could second guess the move, Rowan crossed the distance between them. She wrapped her arms around Quinn's neck and slammed her mouth to his. Her tongue slipped out to trace the seam of his lips. For what seemed like hours he remained motionless, unresponsive to her demanding kiss. On the verge of pulling back, Rowan found herself toppling forward instead.

Quinn fell back, his arms clamped around her waist to hold her close as he took them to the forest floor. He took control, his mouth eating at hers with need and desperation. Rowan could feel the raw emotions rolling off him, or maybe they were hers bouncing back. Tonight might be the only night they'd ever share and she intended to make the most of it.

Years of waiting collided with fear of what was to come and drove them both quickly to the edge. Her nipples pebbled, poked into the hard muscle of Quinn's chest, the contact took the hunger deeper. Undone by the arousal swamping her, Rowan rocked her hips and rubbed her pussy on the hard length pressing against her. He sucked her tongue into his mouth as his hips thrust up.

His cock slid along her slick folds, bumping her clit and delivering sparks of fire into her core. Her womb clenched and moisture flowed from her body to coat them both. The scent of her cream surrounded them and Rowan's body rippled with the orgasm just out of reach. She tore her mouth from his, gasped for breath as she braced her hands on his shoulders and pushed up.

"Not here. Not like this."

Quinn's plea went unheeded as Rowan sought the one thing that would calm the frenzy taking her over. She had to have him inside her. Take him until they were one. Her hand slipped between them and her fingers encircled his erection. She squeezed his flesh, stroked him from root to tip. Using her legs, she rose up and guided the head to her opening.

"Rowan."

Their gazes met and as she lowered her body they held their breath. Resistance to the invasion clenched her muscles and sent fear trickling through her.

"You're not ready."

Rowan threw her head back and laughed. The idea that she wasn't ready for this moment was ludicrous when she'd waited the last five years for this very minute. She leaned forward, brushed her lips on his and whispered, "I'm more ready than I've ever been."

She pushed down and a little more of his cock breached her resisting body. The pain was minimal and no doubt would get worse before the sheer pleasure of being with Quinn surpassed it. With small gyrations, Rowan slowly took him deeper. Each inch stretched her walls to the point of pain but not enough for her to stop.

"Jeez, you're killing me here," he ground out through clenched teeth.

Quinn's face and chest were coated in sweat, his muscles straining as he held still beneath her. With one final lunge she buried his length to the hilt. Any pain was quickly gone as sensations she'd never experienced registered. The fullness of having him inside, the way his cock brushed her tender walls, the cradle of his hips supporting hers, all unfamiliar but so right.

A moan slipped from her throat, mixed with the pleasure of being joined to Quinn and the vagueness of when they would be together again after tonight, and rumbled with a ragged edge. She slumped forward, laid her cheek on his chest and absorbed the truth of them together. Now.

"Take your time." His hand caressed her hair, his fingers combing through the strands. "We can stop if it hurts."

Rowan smiled. Quinn always thought of her first. Sadness flooded her as the certainty of being without him in the future clutched her heart. She took a deep breath. Determination to not allow Marcus or his father to take this beautiful moment from them straightened her spine and gave her the courage to take what joy she could from the darkness that surrounded them.

His hand stroked down her spine, a tender touch meant to soothe, not inflame. But when it came to Quinn everything he did had her body on hyper-alert. A shiver trailed his fingers, the gentle shudder not stopping until it reached her curling toes. Heat spiraled in her belly and dripped lower. Her pussy clenched and his shaft pulsed as her walls gripped him tighter.

As her body adjusted to being joined with Quinn the world disappeared. Her mind focused on the pleasure streaking its way toward a peak she'd never reached before. Bombarded, Rowan knew only one thing. Move. She had to move.

"Rowan, do you want to stop?"

Quinn's words came the second she put action to thought. He growled when she swiveled her hips and he slid out until only the head of his cock remained inside her.

They both moaned as she reversed the motion. Experimenting, Rowan arched her back and cantered her pelvis. The angle changed and more of her tender flesh burst into flame at the new contact. Her clit throbbed, her sheath quivered and cream lubricated her swollen folds.

“God, that feels good.”

Rowan had to agree. A smile curled her lips and she pushed back to sit, straddling him. Quinn’s hands grasped her waist, helped her lift and drop as she found a rhythm that excited them both.

“Damn.” His fingers tightened, dug into her sides. “I’m not gonna last long.”

Good. She wouldn’t be far behind him if she didn’t go over the edge first. They’d always stopped before either of them reached the point of no return. An orgasm would mark them and they couldn’t afford to risk it until they were ready to be mated and before now that wasn’t an option.

She rocked her hips, drove down hard and pulled back slow. Her clit grazed the base of his shaft on every plunge. Muscles coiled, her walls sucking at his length with each pass. Quinn’s hand left her side and delved between her legs. His fingers zeroed in on the tight bundle of nerves. Pleasure sharpened and Rowan’s movements turned frantic.

Quinn finally moved under her. He’d given her control until now but he took it from her with lightning speed. He thrust up, driving his cock impossibly deep. His hands splayed on her hips and he held her still while he fucked her. She rode the razor edge of her orgasm, almost, but not quite going over. A growl filled the air and Rowan’s world tilted.

He spun them, had her on her hands and knees before her next heartbeat. Her fingers curled into the dirt and leaves as Quinn’s thighs met hers. His hot length probed between her legs and with one hard thrust he sank back inside her welcoming pussy. Rowan’s back arched and she pushed her ass against him, taking him deeper. Quinn curled his front over her, their hot, slick skin sliding together.

The slap and squelch of flesh meeting flesh filled the air, mixed with the scent of sex and teased and tantalized until Rowan's breath became jagged rasps of fire lancing her lungs. His fingers found her clit, he circled the wet bud, pinched it—tugged. Sensation splintered and stars flashed before her eyes. Her womb clenched, her pussy clamping around the hot rod impaled in her depths.

A scream ripped from her throat as her orgasm tore through her. Quinn continued to pound into her from behind, his hands gripping her waist to hold her still. Her head and shoulders dropped to the ground, leaves mashed into the side of her face but nothing mattered but the delirious bliss rolling over her.

The growl that rumbled in the air made her jump, the snarl quickly followed by a howl made her coyote lie down and open for her mate completely. Quinn's chest connected with her back and Rowan raised herself up and arched into him. She turned and dropped her head, offered him the tender slope of her neck to sink his teeth into.

Sharp canines scraped her skin, the sting more tingle than pain. Quinn's fingers continued to strum her clit. Her orgasm had receded only to be driven back up again by his caress. He growled against her neck, the sound vibrating down her spine and into the heat simmering in her belly. His thrusts turned into erratic, frenzied pumps of his cock into her convulsing pussy.

Quinn jerked and buried himself to the hilt. Hot spurts of cum bathed her cervix as he sank his teeth into the side of her throat. There was no pain, a slight sting before fiery tingles raced out in a game of chase. Ribbons of delight connected erogenous zones and pulled tight. Spasms started low and deep, spiraling out until they dropped her off the edge again.

Spent, they slumped forward, crumpling to the floor in a tangled mess of bodies and limbs. Quinn rolled to his side and took her with him. He cradled her in his arms, his ragged breath bathing her neck and shoulder. Rowan's breathing was just as harsh, as was the pounding of her heart against her ribs. Her bones felt as solid as cooked noodles and Rowan wondered if she'd ever be able to walk again.

Reality started to return with the night sounds of the forest around them. She knew they had to get up and keep going. If they were going to make the rendezvous site and give Quinn plenty of time to get back to Whispering Creek before daybreak they needed to go now.

Rowan turned in his embrace. "We need to go."

"A minute more won't hurt." He dropped a kiss on her nose. "Rest for a second and then we'll head out again."

By the time their bodies cooled they'd regained their breath. Rowan was the first to move, Quinn gave her one last squeeze before letting go. Neither spoke as they retrieved their bags. Rowan stashed the water bottle inside before stretching the elastic strap and locking the clip into place. The band pinched but once she shifted to coyote form it would be a perfect fit.

"Ready?"

"No, but do we have a choice?" Quinn asked.

Rowan didn't answer him. They both knew this was their only option now that Marcus had attacked her. With the senior Connelly as sovereign, Quinn and Brogan had no way of protecting her against Marcus' advances. No matter how violent he'd become, his father refused to stop him. And with Connelly's supporters firmly in place, Rowan's only hope was to leave and return when it was safe.

The question was, how long would it take to rid the pack of the evil that had taken hold after her and Brogan's parents had died?

Chapter Two

Quinn slowed, turned to sniff the air and waited for Rowan to catch up. They'd taken the last thirty minutes at a walk, the steep descent needed concentration and careful steps. Even in their coyote forms, this ridge was treacherous. She caught up and stopped beside him, her head tilted to the side, she waited for his lead. He wanted her again. Once wasn't enough and before dawn she'd be gone.

They were less than fifty feet from the valley floor and he knew of a small secluded section of rock face that almost formed a cave. He'd head there and they could take a break before moving on. Quinn was satisfied the only other person in this area of the mountains was Brogan and he, about an hour behind, was trailing them at a discreet distance. Rowan didn't know her brother followed, it was just a precaution but they couldn't risk going without him.

He nodded for her to follow and made his way down the last few feet of mountainside. There had been plenty of time to think after their mad dash through the forest. Once they'd cleared the second ridge the chance of anyone seeing them had been unlikely. Only a few pack members lived beyond the town center and those that did chose the eastern side, not the west.

Getting Rowan off the mountains and away from Marcus quickly and with as much stealth as possible meant their best bet was going west. It had taken less than ten minutes to make their plan and put it into action. It had taken twice that for Rowan and Brogan to talk him out of going after Marcus the second Rowan had told them what had happened. He stumbled on a loose rock when the image of her bruised and bleeding as she staggered through the back door flashed through his mind.

His animal had come roaring to life, ready to rip apart the threat to his mate. It didn't matter that they hadn't completed their mating. For years they were forced to

wait, first Rowan's age and then the death of her parents had stopped them. And since that fateful day no one in the pack made a move without the sovereign's okay and there was no way in the world the current sovereign would okay their joining.

Malcolm Connelly ruled by brute strength and intimidation. The once prosperous pack now floundered under his leadership. Quinn and Brogan were working to improve the stability of the pack but the younger members were leaving in droves, there was nothing here but fear and a nonexistent community. Without the next generation, the pack didn't stand a chance of surviving.

They had a plan, were steadily working toward it but with the assault on Rowan he knew things would only get worse from here on. Neither he nor Brogan could protect her from what both Connellys wanted. Standing and support within the pack was what they needed and didn't have. It was only a matter of time before the violence escalated and Quinn wanted her safe. *Needed* her to be safe. And that meant sending her away.

Quinn moved more quickly, Rowan close behind. Not far now and they could rest again. He'd take every extra second with her he could get. The moon, high in the sky, illuminated the rocky section of the valley they headed toward. Small bushes filled this area of the basin, which meant there wasn't as much cover but his senses told him no one else was around to see as they made their way to the darkness of the outcrop.

He shifted back to human form and quickly checked for any animals—dead or alive. His nose told him there weren't any but he wanted to be sure. With the wall of rocks the ground was clear of rotting vegetation and it didn't look like any creature had made this place home since he'd last been here. Quinn stepped back and motioned for Rowan to go first.

She'd shifted and removed her backpack. His body tightened. The sight of Rowan always jangled his nerves but a naked Rowan could jumble his brain in a nanosecond. He blanked out their trek across the mountain and forgot all about the danger she was in. The only thing on his mind was tackling her to the ground and taking her again.

With his hands clenched at his side so he didn't reach for her, Quinn followed Rowan into the dark shelter.

"Are we staying here long?"

Her question startled him but it was her naked body suddenly plastered to the front of him that shocked him speechless. She wove her fingers into his hair and pulled his mouth to hers. His cock sprang to life, hardening between them. Their tongues dueled as they each demanded the other give. Rowan's flavor intoxicated—drove him dizzy with lust. The scent of her arousal mixed with the smell of their earlier lovemaking surrounded them in a lush cocoon.

Quinn's hands slid down the curve of her spine to cup her ass. He squeezed and lifted her against him. Rowan wrapped her legs around his waist and ground her sex against his hard-on. Slick heat coated his swollen flesh and he flexed his hips, rubbing his length over her clit. She bucked into him and threw her head back with a moan. Her breasts rose up and he leaned forward to suck one pointy peak between his lips.

He pulled the delicate morsel deeper, pushed it to the roof of his mouth before retreating and dragging his teeth lightly over the hard tip. Her back bowed and he almost lost his footing. Quinn regained his balance and bent his knees, taking them to the floor quickly. She straddled his hips, her legs crossed behind him to wrap around his torso like a pair of arms.

Rowan held him tight, her breasts pressed to his face and Quinn wasted no time in letting his lips explore her. He licked, kissed and sucked his way across her smooth skin. His beard stubble would leave red marks but he didn't care, he knew by her little cries of delight he wasn't hurting and he wanted to mark her. Wanted her to remember him after she'd left.

The thought of Rowan leaving clenched his heart. It went against everything claiming a mate should be. His coyote howled at the injustice of losing his mate after finally taking her but Quinn's human side knew the only way to truly protect her was to remove her from danger. Until he and Brogan were able to take a stronger standing

in the Whispering Mountains pack Rowan would need to remain hidden. He didn't want to think about how long that could take.

Instead he concentrated on the now, and the hot woman in his arms. Quinn nibbled his way up her chest to the slender column of her throat. He nipped with his teeth until she tilted her head giving him better access to the delicate slope. He laved the shallow dip where her pulse beat frantically. A fine film of sweat covered her skin and he lapped at it as he made his way to her mouth.

When he reached her full lower lip he tugged it with his teeth, urging her to open for him. She complied on a moan and he slipped his tongue out to taste her, just a quick lash to tempt her to come play. He tickled the corners of her mouth before caressing the curve of her smile. Quinn kept his actions slow, teasing them both until it wasn't enough. Their breathing grew harsh, the sound amplified by the cavern walls. Their movements got faster, frantic for just the right friction.

Rowan tore her mouth from his and they both gasped for breath. She rocked her pelvis and his cock slid between her slick folds to rest at her opening. He gripped her hips and thrust into her heat. Sunk to the hilt, her flesh scorched him from tip to root. His sac tightened, her sheath like a hot silk cloth draped around his shaft. She began to ride him, up and down, in a slow slide of rippling muscle that threatened to milk the cum from his balls. He wouldn't last long.

Quinn had spent years imagining getting inside Rowan and the reality far outweighed anything his limited imagination could conjure up. Being his mate she was guaranteed to send his hormones into overload but now that they'd joined he struggled to think past burying himself inside her over and over again. If anything this second time felt better than the first.

Her backside slapped on his thighs on each down stroke, the noise echoing around them. She rode him. Took them both up to the peak as if they hadn't sated themselves an hour ago. Quinn leaned forward and clamped his teeth on her tender flesh where

shoulder met neck. His tongue licked at the soft tissue caught between his teeth and he bit a little harder. She moaned and dropped her head, nibbling on him the same way.

The orgasm stole his breath but nothing could steal the coyote instinct to claim what was his. Sharp canines pierced delicate skin with the first blast of cum through his cock. A second spurt coincided with an intense burning at his throat where Rowan bit him but he was too far down the magical path of ecstasy to register what it meant. Rowan's pussy clenched, her convulsing walls pulling every drop of cum from the bottom of his balls.

As his heart rate slowed and his lungs started to fill with life-giving oxygen Quinn's body sent out a protest. Pain radiated from his knees and shins, the hard rocky ground unforgiving on his weight-bearing limbs. Rowan lay limp on his chest, her heavy breathing fanning out over his pecs. She'd slumped in his lap as the final wave of her climax subsided. He needed to move her, get them both cleaned up and comfortable.

How he would do that in a dirt-covered, cave-like grotto he didn't know. They had limited supplies in their packs. Just a few essentials for Rowan to take with her in her flight to safety and their water bottles. She had two sets of clothes but nothing else. Even if time had permitted, she couldn't afford to run with much more than what she had. The one thing she did have plenty of was money.

Quinn and Brogan had given her all the cash they had in the house. Quinn had also asked Dale to get her some more, he'd told his friend he'd replace it once the bank opened on Monday. He wanted more than anything to go with her but if they ever hoped to return the pack to a prosperous one, he and Brogan needed to work together to make it happen. It was up to the younger generation, those that were left, to see to the future stability of Whispering Springs.

Rowan understood what they wanted to do, *needed* to do. She was the first to say the only way for her to stay safe was to leave the pack. With Marcus intent on having Rowan and his father willing to back him in his quest, no one could protect her well

enough to keep her alive. And Quinn feared it would come to that. If she didn't bow to Marcus, and she never would, he'd kill her.

As much as it went against every need and want inside him, Quinn would rather Rowan be alive and away from him than the alternative. He'd just have to work extra hard to make the mountains a safe haven once more. Somewhere that she could return, a place she'd want to come back to. He squeezed her closer, soaked in the warmth and smell of her. If he was going to let her go he wanted to burn the memory of her in his arms, the way she smelled and the feel of being joined with her on his soul.

"I love you."

Her words floated on the quiet night, a balm to the heart that was tearing in two inside his chest.

"I know." He kissed the top of her head. "I love you too."

"I don't want to let you go."

Quinn squeezed his eyes tight, the pain in her voice sliced at his gut. "If for one second I thought we could do this another way, we would." He eased away to look in her eyes. "I want you alive, whether it's by my side or a thousand miles away I don't care. I'll do everything I can to make it safe for you to return. I promise."

He brushed his lips over hers, a light touch to seal his promise. Rowan's mouth opened on a sigh and Quinn took advantage and slipped his tongue into the dark warmth beyond. The kiss was easy, a delicate exploration that stole his breath. Unhurried, he took the time to savor, to memorize every taste, every texture. After she left tonight Quinn had no idea how long it would be before he saw her again—had her again, and he'd be damned if she'd leave without him having all of her.

His cock hardened. They remained joined and he bucked his hips to slide against her slick heat. Her pussy fluttered along his length and more blood pumped into his shaft. Rowan groaned into his mouth. The sound echoed through his head and sent his pulse pounding in his ears. She rolled her pelvis, rocked them together in a slow

rhythm that drove his arousal higher. Quinn wanted to slam into her, his coyote wanted hard and fast but the man wanted, *needed* soft and slow.

Rowan broke their kiss, trailed her lips down his jaw and continued until she nibbled on his throat. Her hands inched over his shoulders, down his back. When her fingers connected with his pack they both froze. Quinn was stunned to realize he still wore the bag. They both reached to undo the clasp, their hands tangling and making the task difficult. Laughter spilled from Rowan and he soaked in the sound, added it to his store of memories.

"How did we manage to not notice this before?" She nudged his hands away and quickly snapped the clip free.

He smiled. "More important things to notice I guess."

Quinn cupped her breasts, flicked her nipples with his thumbs and Rowan sucked in a breath. Her chest rose and filled his hands with her warm flesh. He leaned forward, drew a taut peak into his mouth and the pack hit the ground behind him. Her fingers curled around his head and held him close. Not wanting to disappoint, he did as her action suggested and sucked harder.

Her nipple puckered hard as a rock against his tongue and Quinn clamped the small bud between his teeth. Rowan's back arched and her breast pulled from his mouth with a small pop. His cock pulsed as her muscles rippled in a wave from root to tip. He groaned. The sound turned into a growl as she rose up and plunged back down. She dug her fingers into his shoulders, her nails biting into his skin.

Together they rocked, thrusting in counterpoint until Quinn's groin burned with the orgasm building. The first spasms of Rowan's climax sent fire shooting up his spine and bursting from his balls. Cum surged up his length and spewed from the tip to bathe her core. Her cry of release bounced off the rock walls, the sound like music in his ears.

She sat in his lap, her head resting on his shoulder and he wrapped his arms around her to hold her closer. Their skin, hot and sticky, clung, binding them together just as their souls now were.

Chapter Three

Rowan waited, crouched behind a tree, making no sound. She could hear Quinn moving around behind her but nothing else moved. Her sense of smell had never been that good, she got by but in no way did she compare to Quinn. Then again no one compared to him when it came to scenting the air.

They arrived at the designated meeting point about fifteen minutes ahead of time. Quinn wanted to be in place down the road from the lookout parking lot to make sure nobody followed Dale. Rowan didn't think they had anything to worry about. Dale Turner was a big city cop, he knew what he was doing. Dale's skills were the reason Quinn had called him.

A low hum filled the air, growing into a roar as the vehicle moved up the mountain road toward them. Headlights flashed off the trees around her but the car kept going. She heard the brakes squeal and finally silence. Rowan waited. Quinn wouldn't move up to meet Dale until he was sure they were alone so she held still and ignored the numbness in her feet.

She wore jeans, a t-shirt and sweater. Sneakers without socks. Quinn, on the other hand, was barely covered by a pair of shorts. He'd left both bags at her feet and once he gave her the all clear she'd move everything left into one pack to take with her. The money Quinn and Brogan had given her was in her pocket. Rowan hated the idea of carrying so much on her but she couldn't afford to access her bank account if she wanted to remain undiscovered.

Quinn appeared before her, sucking the breath from her lungs. It wasn't just his near naked state that left her breathless. He'd moved without a sound, she'd had no clue he was there until he popped up in front of her eyes.

"It's clear." He reached a hand out to her. "Come on, we'll fix the bags at the truck."

Dale Turner was bigger than she remembered, then again he was only a boy when he'd left Whispering Springs. Now he was every inch a man. Her fingers tightened around Quinn's. She didn't fear Dale so much as leaving Quinn. Her instincts were screaming to hold on and never let go but the rational part of her knew she had to leave. If she didn't it wouldn't just be her life in jeopardy.

Marcus would stop at nothing to get at her and she knew because he'd told her, he'd go after Quinn and Brogan to get his way. To protect her mate and her brother she had to leave and let them do what was necessary to rid their pack of the evil festering inside. Neither of them could do that if they were worried about her. For the first time in her life she would be on her own and Rowan had no doubt the next few weeks would be the hardest she'd ever experienced.

Even harder than the day they buried her parents.

She walked beside Quinn, head held high like she had all the courage in the world. If it wasn't for her shaking insides she might even fool herself into believing it.

"Dale." Quinn extended his hand to his old friend. "Long time."

Dale grabbed Quinn's hand, his grip strong. "Too long, but then I don't make it a habit of visiting the mountain now that I've got no family left."

"Sorry about your mom."

"Thanks but it was past time. She'd been sick so long it was a blessing for her to find peace."

Quinn turned to Rowan. "You remember Rowan?"

"I'd like to say it's nice to see you again, Rowan, but under the circumstances I don't think it quite fits."

Rowan smiled, but she didn't look happy, more like she was in pain. "No, the circumstances are not the nicest."

He squeezed her hand and tugged her under his arm before turning back to Dale.
“Did you do everything I asked?”

“Yeah, it’s all sorted. She’ll be out of the state before anyone knows she’s left the mountains. After that Rowan can decide where she goes.”

“Thanks. I owe you.”

“No you don’t. This is what friends are for.”

Rowan had pulled free of his arms and was busy stuffing everything into one of the packs. There was a slight tremor in her hands but other than that it could be any normal day. Except it wasn’t and getting it over with quickly wouldn’t make it hurt any less.

Quinn knew he was dragging this out but he couldn’t bring himself to let Rowan go yet. A few more minutes wouldn’t matter.

“Are you ready? We need to get on the road.” Dale directed his question to Rowan and Quinn felt her stiffen beside him.

“No, but I don’t have a choice do I?”

Dale shrugged. “Not if you want to stay alive.”

His friend knew all that was going on in the pack, Quinn had made sure he’d filled him in on enough detail to ensure he understood the danger Rowan was in. He trusted Dale to see to her safety. The man was one of the few he would consider asking for help. Of the other two, one was at this moment heading back to Whispering Creek and the other was in town keeping a close eye on their mutual enemy.

This was it. He had to let her go and hope like mad it wasn’t the last time he saw her. Quinn grabbed Rowan’s elbow, spun her into his arms and slammed his mouth to hers. His tongue invaded her mouth and conquered any protest she might have. There was no fight, she gave and took in the same breath. They stood there on the moonlit road and devoured each other. The not-so-gentle clearing of a throat brought them back to earth with a jerk.

Dale had turned his back while they kissed. His discreet action proving Quinn's trust was well placed. He could breathe easy knowing Rowan was in good hands. She stepped out of his embrace and took a deep breath before handing him the spare pack.

"I'm ready. Let's go."

With one final look at him she turned and walked away. Quinn clenched his fists, his jaw, every muscle in his body, fought to keep himself in place and not run after her. They were making the right decision. And if it wasn't right he'd move heaven and earth to fix it.

* * * * *

Rowan stared straight ahead. She didn't want to look at Quinn. Didn't want to watch him disappear from view as they drove away. Tears dripped down her cheeks and off her chin to land on her hands clasped tightly together in her lap. Dale started the pickup and she couldn't stop herself. Her gaze darted to the side mirror. He stood at the edge of the forest, a solitary figure in the darkness of pre-dawn hours.

Dale put the vehicle in gear and began to drive. The crunch of gravel under heavy tires grew louder as the car picked up speed. The man watching them leave got smaller with every inch they drove. A sob rattled her chest, the sound a desperate cry from a heart splintering in two. Emotions swelled, bubbling up and over as Rowan's coyote howled for the mate she was leaving behind.

Unable to control the urge, she spun in her seat to look through the rear window. Darkness hid his expression but Rowan knew from Quinn's stance that he hurt as much as she did. Her chest ached and her stomach cramped. The pain almost caused her to double over but she wouldn't turn away, wouldn't deny herself this final glimpse of him. As the truck took a bend in the road Quinn was taken from her field of vision and lowering her forehead to the back of the seat Rowan cried for all they were being denied.

The silence in the cab was broken by Dale's deep voice. "I won't tell you everything will work out." He ran his hand over her back but it was little comfort. "I will tell you that I know Quinn and Brogan well enough to know that if anyone can fix what's wrong with the pack it's those two."

Rowan knew he spoke the truth. Each had the determination and strength to get the job done but the two of them together would be a formidable force. She turned around to face forward and put her seat belt on. Her tears had stopped but the pain hadn't. The ache wouldn't go away until she was home. Back in Quinn's arms.

As the drone of tires rolling over tarmac filled the air Rowan used the mundane sound and the miles they traveled to collect herself. She put her love for Quinn and all she'd left behind in a corner of her heart and closed it off. With each new breath she took, she vowed to do all in her power to help them and if that meant living away she would. She'd be as strong as they needed her to be and when she finally returned she'd take her place in the pack and make her mate and brother proud.

* * * * *

Quinn's paws pounded across the damp earth. He drove his body hard, the need to numb his senses overwhelming as he fought against his coyote to keep heading home. The animal wanted to turn around, follow the truck that had taken his mate but Quinn knew to do so would mean denying them any future at all. The sound of an approaching coyote didn't slow him down.

His coat hung limp, weighed down by the sweat pouring from his body as he pushed it to the limit. Brogan joined him, each running to assuage the ache inside them. Quinn wouldn't use his own pain to diminish his friends. They'd both given up a hell of a lot tonight. Before he knew it they were in the trees behind the house. Slowing, he brought himself to a stop at the tree line.

He didn't want to go forward and he couldn't go back. With a shudder that traveled from his head to his tail he took the first step toward his life without Rowan by

his side. Brogan stayed back, allowed him to lead them across the field that was their backyard. Quinn would have to thank him for that consideration later. They reached the front porch and he shifted from coyote to human.

Naked as the day he was born, Quinn sat on the cold front step and stared off into the distance. Silently, his best friend joined him. Lost in his own thoughts he didn't acknowledge Brogan's presence. Didn't think he could speak yet even if he had something to say. It was Brogan who broke the quiet.

"We'll bring her home." His words were a vow, one they both shared.

Quinn tried to talk but all that came out was a croak worthy of a frog. He swallowed, cleared his throat and tried again.

"Yes, we will."

"I can live with her not being here as long as she's safe from Marcus."

"She'd be safe if you let me go after him now," Quinn growled.

"You know you can't do that. Connelly would set one of his henchmen on you in a heartbeat, he just needs an excuse. Don't give him one, Quinn."

"How can you sit back and not want to rip Marcus to pieces for what he did to Rowan?"

"I never said I didn't want to." Brogan sighed. "Truth is it took every ounce of control I have to *not* go after him. I'd love nothing more than to kill him with my bare hands but we both know that isn't going to help any of us."

Quinn let out a breath. He knew Brogan was right. They needed to gain support from the pack, needed to prove to the Council the sovereign should be removed from his position. And the only way to do that was to outsmart him. The senior Connelly would be tricky to trip up, he'd spent years cementing his brand of leadership on the pack and no one was willing to go against him.

Violence would probably be involved but it wouldn't be the way they won this fight. They needed the support of as many councilmen as they could get and they

needed to stop the younger generation from leaving the mountains too. Without the future to fight for, the older pack members wouldn't see any point in throwing their allegiance behind Brogan.

"You're right. I just need to get past tonight and then I'll be fine." Quinn hoped he spoke the truth. Living without Rowan would not be easy but he would do what he had to so he could secure their future and that of the pack.

Brogan stood and clapped his hand on Quinn's shoulder. "I'm going inside for coffee. Are you coming?"

"No. I think I need to be outside a bit longer. Maybe go for another run." Energy vibrated through his body, his coyote stirring with renewed hunger. He wanted to break free and run. But Quinn was in control. The animal urges would not get the best of him. Standing abruptly, he knocked Brogan's hand off. "I'll be back soon."

He jumped off the steps and without thought he shifted to coyote form and ran. He headed for ridge that would give him a clear view of his home and remind him of everything he stood to lose if he didn't pull himself together and fight with all he had. As he darted through the underbrush he disturbed creatures just waking from a night of sleep. The forest stirred to life around him, another reminder of all that was at stake.

With speed and agility he made his way up the mountain and to the outcrop that overlooked the house he shared with the Wilder siblings. Pain lanced his chest as he thought of how empty the house would be without Rowan in it. How empty he would be without her.

Epilogue

Brogan Wilder stood at his bedroom window with coffee in hand. He'd known where Quinn was headed, he didn't think his friend should be alone but he gave him the space he seemed to need. He had a clear view of the mountainside and the ridge behind the house. From there, he knew you could see for miles. Raising his mug he took a sip of rich dark liquid.

The sun was almost up and Brogan knew today would be the beginning of a long road. One he wouldn't travel alone but only the toughest would survive it. He wasn't sure how exactly they were going to remove Malcolm Connelly from his position as sovereign but he knew they would. All he had to do was think about what his sister and his best friend were being forced to endure to know he'd do whatever it took to put the pack back to rights.

A small flock of birds burst from the trees near the top of the ridge and Brogan knew Quinn was close to reaching the summit. He understood the need to run, the need to feel in control that was coursing through his friend's veins. Brogan's own blood pumped with the yen to run and never stop but he couldn't afford to give in. Not today and not ever. If he was going to lead the pack into a prosperous future he couldn't give in to the emotion.

His shoulders slumped with all that rested on them. Brogan knew he'd done the right thing sending Rowan away, knew how much easier it would be for them to wrestle control of the pack from Connelly with her safely stashed away. But all the logical arguments in the world couldn't take away the pain of losing his sister. Not even knowing she'd be able to come home one day helped to ease the ache in his heart.

He could only imagine the pain his best friend and sister were suffering. If nothing else he'd make sure both Connellys paid for that. Brogan wasn't a vengeful person but

where the Connellys were concerned he'd make an exception. Determination straightened his spine, they would see this through. Satisfied they'd made the right decision, Brogan watched and waited for the new day.

And as dawn broke, a lone coyote stood on Whispering Ridge. In the solitude of the first morning light he threw back his head and howled.

About the Author

Years of slavery to four young aliens and their sire failed to squash the love of writing or reading hiding behind the façade of a boring, stay-at-home mum. Escaping from the mother ship with vivid imagination intact, Rhian uses her superpowers for good.

Okay, so that's not quite how it happened. Married to her very own hero for over 20 years and raising a family of four kept writing on the back burner, but now with more time to spend on the things that she loves most, Mr. Muse and Rhian have taken over.

Writing multiple genres keeps life interesting and busy. Rhian can be found in numerous places online, where her love of talking is well satisfied. An Aussie who's spent years living overseas, Rhian and family are now happy residing back in their native land down under.

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

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