



A Broken Bond

A Wolf Tracks Novel

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Dedication

To all my gals at Paranormal Romantics!!

Chapter One

White noise ran across the radio waves. Cash swore, wiped the rain from his hands onto his worn, dark jeans, then turned the knob on the radio. *Free Bird* blared through the speakers of his '69 jet black Camaro. He settled back into the leather seat, ran his hand through his dirty blond, textured hair and wiped away the moisture dripping onto his prominent nose and trickling down his sculpted cheek.

The visit with his sister, Taya, had gone better than expected. It'd been two years since he'd last seen her or the cubs. At twenty-eight, his twin was still a better human than he would ever be—too much wolf lived in his blood.

Taya was a perfect mother to her twin babes, Malik and Marlee, and mate to Royce—all of whom belonged to the Montana pack. Cooke City was their birthplace and where his family had been born and died. He was the only one of his blood relatives who had left, and would probably ever leave, the pack's protection.

It shamed him to think that he had left his sister. With his parents long deceased, he was the last of his family ties. But rogue was more Cash's taste. He hadn't belonged to a pack for two years and that suited him just fine. Once a Montana pack member, he had been loyal and faithful to his Alpha, Blaine. Now, that allegiance had left him. Not on harsh terms, but nonetheless, he didn't belong here anymore.

With a groan, he shook away the guilt of abandoning those who needed him and wiped the remaining droplets of rain off his face. He wouldn't burden himself with guilt. There was enough weight on his heart as it was.

The death of his mate, Jaclyn, had been the reason he left the pack. His soul mate had been killed by a rare disease that took her life within days of the first sign of illness. When her heart had stopped beating, so had his. Nothing lived in him anymore.

The scent of wolf reached Cash before the door to his car opened. Royce sank into the seat, drenched by the falling rain, and shut the door behind him. "We have to talk," he said, gruffly.

Cash respected Royce as much as he would a brother. More than once they'd fought side by side and rejoiced in victory together. Now, as he met Royce's firm hazel gaze, he was aware he was not his equal. "Say what you have to then," Cash responded curtly.

Royce's eyelids sank to slits as pure contempt washed across his naturally soft features. "You're a real selfish bloke, you know that?"

"Yes," Cash replied with a snort. "I've heard."

"Do you know the pain you have caused your sister?"

Cash shut his eyes. He didn't want to be reminded. "What do you want, Royce? I've not come here to be made to feel guilty."

"It's time to come home," Royce nearly spat. "Enough of this rogue shit. You have a family here—responsibilities, obligations to your pack. You cannot continue to run away from your problems."

Cash snapped his eyes open and glared at Royce. "There is nothing here for me anymore. No reason to stay."

Royce nearly shot out of his seat, full of anger. "I've got three reasons." He pointed back to the simple red brick home. "Right fucking in there."

Cash gulped. His heart wrenched at the thought of either his sister or the cubs missing him. Wolves were bound deeper than humans. He'd felt his twin's loss deeply, but compared to his own despair, it never measured up. "I'm no good to them now."

Royce's gaze turned challenging. "Says fucking who?"

"I say."

"Bullshit," Royce snapped adamantly. "You've had a rough go of things since the death of Jaclyn. We all understand this, Cash. It's why we've stayed away for so long and haven't come searching for you. Taya thought your return tonight meant you had reconciled whatever you needed to and that you were coming back." His expression darkened, his voice a near snarl. "But no, you came to only show that you were alive. Which, by the way, you left us all to wonder about."

"I..." Cash hesitated, searching for words. After a long pause, he said, "I needed to see them."

"Good for fucking you." Royce bashed his fist against the dash. "Now, you've re-opened a wound. Taya considers you dead, do you know that?"

Cash closed his eyes, and gulped deeply. It pained him to hear his twin had to resort to such thoughts. “No, I didn’t know that.”

“She had to or she can’t get through her days. When you left after the funeral, it took Taya a month to recover.” Royce bashed his hands against the dash again, harder this time, and his fist left a small ding in the plastic. “A fucking month!” He pointed a finger in Cash’s face, his gaze firm and livid. “You may have felt that the world fell apart, but you were not the only one—Taya’s world crumbled, too.”

Cash tore his gaze from Royce’s. He couldn’t even look at the man. “Things have changed.”

“You have changed. That is undeniable. This coward I see before me resembles nothing of the Cash I once knew.” Royce’s voice shook with rage. His body trembled in his seat. “What is it you are looking for? Why do you run from your pain? When it is the ones here who could help you—your sister, your pack.”

“I have no pack,” Cash growled.

Royce’s breath hitched, the anger evaporated, and his tone came soft in a whisper. “If that was heard by others, hearts would break.”

Cash glanced up and stared at the man who he once considered a friend. “I live only for Jaclyn, because she would ask this much of me. The only reason my heart still beats is I fear I will disappoint her if I join her. There is nothing left in me to give. My presence would only create despair and hardship. I say again, I am no good.” Royce’s gaze swept with emotions he’d never seen before. He had to wonder what showed in his eyes in that moment. He suspected they showed as dead as he felt inside. “Tonight, I came here hoping I’d feel something being around Taya and the cubs.” He let the coldness, the emptiness in his heart, rise to his face. “I felt nothing. No warmth. No yearning to be back here.”

Royce frowned. “So you care nothing for them?”

“I am unable of caring for anything.”

Royce sighed deeply and the tension surrounding him softened. “If this is all true, which I have no doubt it is, you are right—you must go.” He reached up and put his hand on Cash’s shoulder. “Don’t come back. Never step foot

in this territory again unless you come home restored. I will not let you continue to ruin Taya. As her mate, I must protect her from that.”

Cash nodded as words escaped him.

Royce opened his door and began to climb out, but stopped to glance back. “Find whatever it is you are looking for, find a reason to live again, and then, Cash, come home.”

When the door slammed shut, Cash’s breath wheezed out as if he hadn’t breathed in a lifetime. He glanced out to the rain pouring down his side window and saw Taya standing at the door just under the sconce. Head full of curls, round rosy cheeks, and the kindest brown eyes he’d ever seen. Yes, this was home—but he didn’t belong here anymore, and he didn’t think he ever would.

* * * *

Rylie shifted in the passenger seat of the lime green Volkswagen Beetle as Wyoming mountain passed by in all its beauty. It was the hundredth time she’d fidgeted on the drive down Beartooth Highway. The night was dark as thick storm clouds covered the sky while rain beat against the windshield and the wipers worked madly to keep up.

She took a quick glance toward Chloe and noticed the firmness in her best friend’s posture hadn’t changed. Her hands were stuck at ten and two, her knuckles white from the death grip on the steering wheel. Rylie sighed, then glanced back out to the wilderness.

A short time later, they crossed over the state line into Montana. Chloe let out a loud breath and sank back in her seat in relief. “Guess Layne was none the wiser.” Her tone was relieved.

Rylie nodded as she let out a deep breath of her own. “Apparently not.” If Layne had known what she was attempting, she wouldn’t have made it out of Wyoming. Her death would have come first. Harsh, but that was a pack rule. She was bound to him, his mate for all eternity, and since she was immortal, that meant forever.

Layne would have killed her for her betrayal—no one would have stopped it. Her father, Edwin, once Alpha to the Wyoming pack, had been succeeded

by Layne only days before. Layne had unofficial business that brought him into Cody, and even Rylie couldn't deny they were destined to be bound.

The problem? Layne was scum-bag central. Greedy and cold-hearted was only the tip of the iceberg. He also lacked character. Sexy, of course, as were all werewolves, but his strong, sculpted body and tall, dark, and handsome features were of no interest to Rylie. She may only be twenty-four, but she had enough sense to not fall for a man on looks alone.

In a matter of twenty-four hours, Layne had issued a challenge to claim the status of Alpha in the Wyoming pack, claimed Rylie as his mate, and killed her parents. Her father fought with valiance, but in the end, it hadn't been enough. Her mother, loyal to her mate right to the very end, refused to submit to the new Alpha. The end result—she died right along with him. In thirty minutes, her entire family had dwindled down to nothing.

Now, Rylie focused on her survival. Besides, she wasn't entirely alone. Chloe, her best friend, was her anchor. Born a day apart, destined sisters born from different mothers, they always joked. Friendships like the one with Chloe weren't formed through time. It was a bond that lay soul deep, and one that Rylie was going to miss tremendously.

Chloe may only be five-five with auburn hair that coiled between her shoulder blades and a pretty face with sandy-colored eyes, but she was as tough as any man. Chloe's courage and in-your-face attitude was something Rylie envied. She had yet to find the balls that Chloe seemed to be naturally born with.

"We're only ten minutes from Cooke City," Chloe said, drawing Rylie away from her thoughts. "Are you really sure you want to do this? You'll be on the run forever."

"What other choice to do I have?" Rylie sighed. "I can't stay with Layne—he's horrible."

"That fucker," Chloe growled. "Treating you like he has. You'd think when he found his mate, he would treat her like a queen. Not like a door mat."

Rylie wasn't going to argue that point. Layne had been nothing but wretched to her. He'd barely spoken a word to her since their bonding ceremony, and even that Rylie wished she could erase from her mind.

Virgins should be handled with care—with consideration. Something Layne had obviously never been taught. Her first sexual experience held no touching except when he put lubrication on her opening and then shoved his dick in. If she never had sex again, she'd be perfectly fine with that.

“All right,” Rylie finally said, willing herself to leave the past behind her. “Go through it again with me?”

“Again?” Chloe groaned.

“Yes, again. I want to make sure you have your story straight. I don't want this coming back on you.”

“Fine—once more, then that is it,” Chloe said with a firm look. “You called me up and told me you wanted to go for a drive into Cooke City.”

“Yes...and?”

“We went into a little store, I was looking at a book, then I turned around and you were gone.”

“Right! And what are you going to do when you drop me off?”

Chloe rolled her eyes, exasperated. “Call Layne and report you missing.”

“Exactly,” Rylie responded, ignoring the look. “Just stick to that story and you'll be fine.”

“I have no idea why you are worrying about me. You're the one who could end up six feet under.”

Wasn't that the truth? “He won't find me.” Rylie hoped, begged, prayed. “I'll just keep running until he gets tired.”

Chloe's expression shifted to knowing. “Let's just hope he gets tired of hunting soon.”

A wave of fear mingled with annoyance as it washed through her. All of this was true. What if he never grew tired? Layne seemed the type of man who would chase her till the end of the earth. Not for romantic reasons, only because she belonged to him. He owned her, and what he owned, he kept.

Cooke City's downtown lit the sky minutes before they entered the town. Wild-Wild West still played a serious role here. If a cowboy came out with the whole chaps and spurs get up, Rylie wouldn't have been surprised. Cody, her home town, wasn't a busy city compared to some, but it was definitely bigger than this hick town. A couple of gas stations sat on either side of the

road, small stores—hardware, a local store, used book store, couple knickknack junky places and a few clothing shops—that was about it.

Chloe pulled the car off the road, put it in the park, then met Rylie's gaze. "This is it then, I guess."

"Yup, guess so," Rylie replied, a lump forming in her throat. As much as leaving Chloe behind was gut wrenching, she was happy within the pack. Her mate, Devan, was a man to drool over and who loved her silly. Her place was with him.

Chloe breathed in deeply, then blew it out as she hugged Rylie tightly. "Be safe, okay?"

"I'll sure try." Rylie laughed, a nervous sound that said just how she felt.

Chloe backed away, her eyes filled with tears. "If you get in any trouble, call me. Devan said he'll come and help you if you need it."

Rylie kissed Chloe's cheek. "Tell Devan I said thank you, but I'm just going to get as far away as I can. Layne will get bored. He will move on. I am sure of it."

"Of course he will," Chloe responded. "Give it a week and he'll forget all about you."

If Rylie hadn't known her so well, she would have believed her. But as it was, she knew Chloe had just lied. "I'll miss you," she managed, her throat tight.

"Me too," Chloe squeaked.

Rylie grabbed the door handle, opened it, then gave a push against the door with her arm. "So, I'm going."

Chloe's tears spilled over. "Yes, you're going."

"Right now," Rylie said. Her own tears formed.

Chloe gave a firm nod. "Go."

Rylie willed herself out of the car, forced her body to move, and soon, she was standing outside of the Bug with her hand on the door. With a firm shove, she slammed it closed. Tears overtook her vision—the world went blurry. Chloe's cries echoed through the dark sky.

A cold rain came around Rylie. She raised her head to the sky and let the sensation ease her. She was free from Layne, from a lifetime of mistreatment, from years of unhappiness.

The sound of a phone beeping snapped Rylie back to focus. It was time. She needed to run. With a deep sniff, the scent of wolf surrounded her. Her heels dug into the ground, then she pushed off and ran as fast as she could.

A muscle car rested outside the local store, the headlights on, and a figure sat in the front seat. Whoever sat in that car was a male and he smelled rouge. A lifeline had just been thrown her way at the opportune moment. A rogue wolf wouldn't be opposed to helping her. He wouldn't know who she was or care what she was doing—he wasn't bound by loyalty.

The rain splashed up as her feet banged against the ground. She never stopped running. This was a good way out. She continued to run toward the car, her need to get out of the line of sight growing more urgent.. The moment she met the passenger door, she slammed into the side, grabbed the handle and flew in, shutting the door behind her. She met the driver's bewildered gaze. "Go—please, just drive."

Chapter Two

Cash blinked once to assure himself that what he saw was indeed correct. A moment ago, he had been getting a cola from the store. Now, a young woman—she appeared to be in her early twenties—sat in his car staring at him with wide, frightened eyes.

It wasn't her presence that startled him most, or that she was a werewolf—it was the look of her. Simply breathtaking. A Brazilian beauty—dark, tanned skin, long mocha hair, rounded curves, deep blue eyes that he suspected would be pretty if not in this situation. But that was only the tip of what captivated him. Her scent was intoxicating. His nostrils flared, and his cock stiffened in response to her delectable scent. A reaction that surprised and intrigued him. It had been a long time since a woman had stirred his wolf. With a groan, he forced his mouth to work. "Mind telling me why you are soaking my leather seat?"

Her eyes grew wider in fear, and tears streamed down her face. "Please—I'll tell you everything." She glanced over her shoulder as if something was hunting her, then met his gaze again with pleading eyes. "I don't have much time—please, just drive."

Her fright stirred something in him, some protectiveness that made him react. He threw the car in first, slammed on the gas pedal and released the clutch. In mere seconds, the car roared down the wet, slick road. Apparently, he was destined to help this stunning wolf escape.

Cooke City quickly vanished into the night. Cash took a look in the rear-view mirror to see if whatever had frightened her was following them. Nothing but darkness lay behind. He took a peek out of the corner of his eye and the woman had her arms wrapped around herself as she shivered. On impulse, he turned the heat on and focused the vents on her. It was a warm night, but it appeared she needed the heat.

"Thank you," she whispered.

He took another quick glance in the rear-view mirror. Still, nothing followed. He pulled off the road, sending stones to spray up around his wheels. With a quick move, he put the car in neutral and snapped his gaze toward the woman. "Care to explain now? We are safe here."

She slowly glanced toward him. “I...I...” Her voice was soft, sweet and matched the beauty of her tenfold.

Cash laughed. Watching her stumble amused him more than he thought it should. “That interesting, is it?”

The woman smiled. Cash focused in on her lips. They were plush and spread perfectly along her face to create a wonderful view of her mouth. For the first time in longer than he could even comprehend, he enjoyed the sight. His cock grew harder as images of her mouth on his body filled his mind. Then, he met her gaze again. She may have been frightened, but her remarkable eyes held spirit. He was curious to discover the woman that lay in those depths and the one that caused his body to react so intensely. He quickly shook his head, focusing away from his demanding groin. “Let’s start with, what is your name?”

“Rylie,” she answered as she gave a deep sniff.

“I’m Cash.”

She nodded, but still said nothing.

“Are you from around these parts?” Cash asked, digging for a little information.

“No.”

Fuck, he was going to spend a lifetime in this car if he didn’t push her a little. Her sadness made him hesitant, but patience had never been his strong point. “Do you have a habit of running into stranger’s cars?”

“No.” She laughed. The sound of it sent waves of pleasure running down Cash’s spine. “Never.”

He was glad to hear that. “So then, Rylie. Do tell, why are you in my car?”

She glanced away from him to look at her hands. “I’m running away.”

Wonderful, just what Cash needed—a fucked up runaway to deal with. No matter how much she might be pleasing to look at, he didn’t need the trouble. “Running away from what?”

“Not what,” she whispered. “Who.”

That surprised him. “And why are you doing that?”

“Because I’m in danger.”

He snorted at the obviousness of that statement. “That is apparent, isn’t it now?”

Her gaze snapped up and connected with his. “A few days ago, I was mated to a horrible, cruel wolf.”

Fire burned in her eyes. It was a look that nearly had him laughing. She was such a little thing, but her look now said she would bury him if he got smart with her again. It was a trait he found amusing and one that appealed to his wolf. “And this is who you are running from—your mate?”

The burn in her eyes deepened and the air filled with the stench of hate. “I will not—always refuse to— let him have me.”

“And you believe you have a choice here?” Cash asked, disappointed that she had been claimed. As much as he wanted to wrap this luscious woman around his body, she was indeed mated and couldn’t be touched. His cock softened in defeat.

She lifted her chin in defiance. “Damn right I do.”

Cash snorted a laugh and shifted in his seat to face Rylie. To deny a mate bond was to speak of something impossible. Maybe she was just inexperienced and scared of being with a man. He suspected that was the case here. “What has he done that is so horrible?”

“Killed my entire family.”

Cash’s brow rose. He waited for her to retract her statement. She never did. There went his theory. He cleared his throat. “Run that by me again.”

“When it was discovered that Layne was my mate, my parents were about as pleased as I was. He is a horrible man. My father tried to refuse the ceremony and Layne killed him.” She wiped a tear from her face. “Then, he killed my mother.”

“And your Alpha allowed this?” For one thing, this ran against Alpha rules, and another, he couldn’t imagine an Alpha being so cruel as to allow such a thing to take place.

She nodded. “He couldn’t stop it.”

Cash gave his head a shake in an attempt to clear his thoughts and understand all this. An Alpha was lead by rules, rules that ran higher than that Alpha. Allowing anyone to come in and break those rules made no sense. Deaths were only—and always—decided by the Alpha. If Rylie’s

parents had refused to allow the mate bond to take place, her mate had the right to challenge the father to claim her. That made sense. What didn't make sense was that her mother had been killed. Women were never brought into a challenge, nor were they ever killed. There had to be more here, more that Rylie wasn't telling him. "This Layne did indeed claim you as mate then?"

"He did. After their deaths, I was forced."

Cash tensed. A primal instinct to hunt and kill whoever forced Rylie into submission overtook him. "Forced," he repeated through gritted teeth.

"I wasn't given a choice—the ceremony was completed...and..." Her voice shook. "It was horrible."

Cash shut his eyes for a moment, commanding himself to settle. It was unlike him to react on his emotions alone. Never had he felt the need to protect so intensely. His wolf growled and craved to kill within him. After a few more stabling breaths, he opened his eyes and met her gaze. "Are you telling me that he raped you?"

"No, not rape exactly—but it wasn't like I had a choice. If I didn't complete the bond, he would have killed me." She lowered her head again. Shame wafted off her. "I didn't want to die."

Cash reached out to comfort her, then realized what he was doing and quickly pulled back his hand. Fuck, what had gotten into him? He was never compelled to give comfort. Two years of pain had caused that. "No one would want that," he said sharply to hide his reaction.

She glanced up to him with sad eyes. "I told him I didn't want him and that I would never be happy with him."

"But he didn't care?" His voice came out soft in response to the despair held in her eyes. He wanted nothing more than to grab her and erase that pain. But that was not his right. She didn't belong to him.

She shook her head, wiping away another fallen tear. "No, he didn't care."

Cash let out a long, deep breath. He couldn't just leave Rylie to fend for herself. His reaction to her made him believe she was in serious danger. If his protective instincts were running wild, it meant he had a responsibility to help her. Apparently, she was being mistreated. The problem, he hadn't the resources to protect her. "You have nowhere to go?" he asked.

“Nowhere, and no one to go to.”

“I see,” he said, examining her. He didn’t doubt she was being truthful, but he did believe she was holding back. The story didn’t make sense, which meant he wasn’t being told all of it. Regardless, she needed protection. “Right then,” he finally said, settling back into his seat. After he shifted the car back into first, he hit the gas pedal and the car roared beneath him.

“Where are we going?” Rylie asked, wiping her remaining tears.

There was only one place Cash could think of to bring her. Only one person he knew and trusted would know how to handle this situation. He met her gaze, smiled reassuringly and said, “Somewhere safe.”

* * * *

To be safe sounded good to Rylie, but she doubted that was even possible. For some reason, she trusted Cash. Hell, could be because the man was built to defend. He filled his leather seat completely and nearly reached the back seat with the needed space for his legs.

Just because she was scared out of her wits and lingering on some serious depression didn’t mean she couldn’t acknowledge his attributes. Ashy blond fauxhawk hair, eyes that were either green or blue—she hadn’t quite decided. Blessed with chiseled features, a lower lip a little more plump than the top—it was impossible not to notice him.

Abruptly, she realized how inappropriate it was for her to ogle him. Focusing her thoughts away from the sexy wolf, she asked, “Have you always been rogue?”

He quickly glanced to her and smirked. “Enough about you—onto me, is that it?”

She nodded without hesitation. Sexy and smart. Her mind might wish to ignore his wolfish charms. Her body had other ideas.

His smile grew as he looked back to the road. “No, I wasn’t always rogue—used to belong to the Montana pack.”

The way his lips curved so invitingly caused a little stirring within her, warming her in all the right places. He held a mysterious air about him, as if

he knew answers to secrets, and the effect on her made her cheeks burn. “So, this is your home then?”

“At one time it was,” he answered.

To belong to a pack and choose a rogue life, she couldn’t comprehend why he would want that. “Why did you leave?” She voiced her bewilderment. He gave her a look that she suspected was his way of telling her he didn’t want to talk about it. Well, she’d been known to put her foot into her mouth many times. “I’m waiting for you to answer me,” she demanded.

The side of his mouth quirked up. His gaze remained on the road ahead. “Are you always this pushy?” Then, he met her gaze, and amusement lit his eyes.

“Yes,” she snapped. For the oddest reason, which she had yet to figure out, not answering the question annoyed her. She wanted to know more about him and wouldn’t let him deflect her questions.

He glanced back out to the road and shifted as if uncomfortable in his seat. “Two years ago, my mate died—after that, I left.”

And once again, Rylie wished she’d stuffed her foot in deeper and kept her mouth shut. “I’m...I’m...sorry to hear that.”

He acknowledged her condolences with a quick nod.

She sighed softly, looking out the windshield. The rain was beginning to settle. “Well, that’s something we have in common then. You’ve lost your mate. I’ve lost my family.” When silence met her, she glanced over to Cash who had his brow arched. She laughed, realizing just how sick she really was. “Guess that’s kind of morbid, isn’t it?”

“Maybe to some” —He grinned— “it would be considered so.”

The conversation between them was actually settling her. His strong presence, or the lack of attention on her, was easing her wound up emotions. In response, she sank back into her seat, released her arms from around her waist and crossed her legs. “You don’t live here then?”

He shook his head. “Haven’t since the day my mate, Jaclyn, died.”

Rylie really looked at him. Along his face there were hard lines of despair, sadness in his eyes, deep loneliness. All of which created a not so great feeling in the pit of her stomach. His pain cut through her—in a way that

surprised her, since he was a stranger. Ignoring the ache, she moved on. “Do you have family here then?”

He nodded. “A twin sister, Taya. Royce, her mate, has roots in Cooke City. They returned there to raise their two cubs.”

Maybe she’d been expecting to hear he had no one, considering he hadn’t kept to his pack, but learning of a family only deepened that ache inside her. “They must miss you terribly.”

His eyes fell shamefully. “I suspect they do.”

The disgrace set hard in his features said that he understood what it cost his family to have him away. Wolves were pack creatures, bound together tightly. To have—especially a family member—willingly gone from the pack would be nearly unbearable. It was lost to her why he would choose this—not only for his family, but for himself. “Do you not long for your pack?”

“At first, it was a challenge.” He slowed the car and took a hard right onto a gravel road. “It was a bit of an adjustment to be a lone wolf.”

“I bet it was,” she replied, unable to even fathom what that would be like. A pack was a security blanket. Without that, it’d be like standing naked in the middle of Times Square. One thing it did show was his character. Only a strong-willed wolf would survive the rogue lifestyle. From what she heard, most wolves either killed themselves—which, as an immortal, was not an easy task—or they merely took to wolf form and never returned to their humanity. Which, in the end, would get them killed anyway. A werewolf who got stuck in wolf form was a dangerous wolf indeed. “What was your life like before...you know?”

His hands tightened around the steering wheel. Part of her wished she said nothing. The other part was too eager to know more about him. “I was a guard for the Montana Alpha,” he replied.

Shit! Cash wasn’t just some random wolf. He had strong connections to Alphas, one thing she didn’t want to hear. It shouldn’t have taken her by surprise to hear he was used to solving disputes, taking out threats, keeping the Alpha he protected safe. If Cash’s human form was this overwhelming, his wolf form would be equally so. To keep the causal appearance up and her unease obvious, she asked, “Who is the Montana Alpha?”

“Blaine.”

She thought back, pondering if she'd heard the name. Her father kept her out of Alpha business as much as he could. Get a room of Alphas together and it usually led to foul language and fist fights. *No place for a young lady*, her father always said. The number of Alphas she had met could be counted on one hand. Blaine was not one of them. "He's obviously a good Alpha if he let you leave."

Cash nodded firmly. "He has proved to be a strong leader with a compassionate heart."

His soft tone, and the kind look in his eye, spoke volumes. She melted. Like a list, his good traits were being checked off. Sexy, powerful, kind natured—and on and on. Willing herself away from her inner monologue, she asked, "You care for him?"

"I respect him," he responded with a firm nod.

Men—never show outright affection or admit it aloud. "Isn't that one in the same?"

He shrugged. "To some."

Apparently, his blasé answers were built into his personality. She hadn't quite decided if it annoyed or intrigued her. One thing she did know, it made her more persistent. "How long did you guard for Blaine?"

"Ten years."

She examined him further, searching the side of his face for signs of age. At thirty, aging stopped and immortality set in. The knowledge in the eyes was the only way to tell the true age of an immortal. Rylie had a knack for it, which used to amuse her mother daily. If she was off, it was usually only by a year or two. But as she swept her gaze across Cash, all she found was a young, hunky man. "You don't look old enough to have guarded him so long."

He glanced to her with an arched brow. "How old do I look?"

"Twenty-six."

"Twenty-eight," he corrected.

First, she was pleased her assumption wasn't far off. Then, she did the math in her head. "That means you joined him when you were sixteen?"

"Two days after my sixteenth birthday, to be exact."

She'd never heard of a guard joining an Alpha so young. The job came with danger, serious lose-your-life danger. "Your parents allowed that?" she asked.

Cash glanced back out to focus on the road. "I joined Blaine after my parents' deaths. He didn't seek me out, I went to him."

Her heart sank for him. His life was driven by death. Every moment, every life altering event, had been found not through want or ambition. It was through the act of loss that compelled his ways. He may wish to not talk of his personal life or their deaths, and judging by his tense body position, he didn't, but she did. "How did they die?"

"My father guarded Blaine at the time—vengeance from a neighbouring pack cost my father not only his life, but the life of my mother. If my sister and I had been home at the time, I imagine we would have gone with them."

How horrible. "Did you find out who did it?"

His gaze met hers again in a hard, cold answer. "Yes. Years later, I found the man responsible."

Nothing more needed to be said. Rylie knew enough of werewolf nature. The man was dead. "Blaine took you and your sister in then?"

"He set us up close to his home, gave Taya a job and started to train me."

This was a question she wondered often enough. She'd never had the chance to ask it of her father's guards. She wasn't about to waste this opportunity. "Did you like being a guard for an Alpha?"

He grinned, keeping his eyes on the road. "Loved it."

Sounded too gung ho and crazy for her liking, but of course, a man would find that fun. "What did you enjoy so much about it?"

"The thrill to hunt, to defend the pack—it was all something I enjoyed."

She hadn't been blind to the fact that he said *the* pack, not *my* pack. "Do you think you'll ever go back to *your* pack again?"

His gaze met hers again, hard set and firm. "I have no pack." He tore his eyes from hers and focused back to the windshield.

"So you say," she whispered to herself. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him tense slightly. Obviously, she was louder than she thought. "Well, this Alpha, Blaine, seems like a great wolf. To allow you such freedom is practically unheard of."

He stared a moment longer. Immediately, she wished for a stick to beat herself with. Most wolves didn't talk of Alphas in such casual conversation. Just as one wouldn't a queen unless there was breaking news. If she didn't put a clamp on it, she was going to give herself away. This was the perfect time to turn the conversation onto herself, but she wasn't about to tell him the truth, and she couldn't lie to him either. It just didn't sit right. Maybe due to the trauma that surrounded his life, it'd be like telling a starving kitty there was no food while holding onto a can of tuna. Just wrong.

"To answer your question," Cash finally said, breaking the silence. "I've yet to meet another Alpha who compares in character to Blaine." He smirked. "And trust me, I have met many."

Obviously, not one, she thought. Blaine sounded all too much like her father. Playing stupid, she said, "It'd be great, you know, to spend more time with one than just a passing glance."

He looked to her curiously. "That is something you would like?"

She nodded, hoping her fake excitement showed through. "Sure, why not?"

"Well it's your lucky day then." He turned off the road, onto the brick driveway which led up to a ranch style mansion. "'Cause you're about to get your wish."

Chapter Three

The moment the words left Cash's mouth, Rylie's expression tightened and the scent of fear reeked through the car. Her reaction made him unhappy. The need to ease her worries compelled him. "Blaine will not hurt you," he told her.

She inhaled sharply, then she glanced to him and smiled—it looked forced. "Just really excited," she answered in over exaggerated glee.

Even if he hadn't already seen the lie on her face, he would have smelled the deceit. Her scent of emotions came strong around him. He doubted she could hide anything of herself. A realization that surprised him. It'd been a long time since a woman had been so exposed. The last had been Jaclyn.

He studied her, pondering that thought. Her legs were crossed and her hand was tucked into her thighs as if it was cold. His gaze traveled toward her hidden hand and a sudden need to be that hand between her legs captured him. His cock acknowledged by firming up and he shifted in his seat to ease the pressure against his jeans.

When he glanced up, he met Rylie's gaze. She was watching him with curious, surprised eyes. He wasn't sure if she saw his reaction to her or if meeting the Alpha left questions in her mind. Quickly, he tore his gaze away and back onto the road.

He slammed on his breaks.

Rylie screamed. Her hands pressed against the glove compartment as she braced herself.

Cash snorted, nodding toward the man standing in the center of the drive. "Nothing ever does change."

"What doesn't change?" Rylie's voice came out as a squeak. "And who is that?"

"That"—Cash turned off the car, then grabbed the door handle—"is the Alpha, Blaine." He opened the door and glanced over to Rylie. "Stay here for a moment."

She nodded, letting out a loud breath he suspected was to steady herself.

Once out, Cash made his way to Blaine who stood only a hairsbreadth away from the bumper off the car. “Do you always insist on trying to wreck my car?”

Blaine grinned. “Always did keep you on your toes.”

Cash laughed. The sound surprised him. He had laughed more in the last few hours than he had in two years.

Apparently, it had the same effect on Blaine. His golden eyes went a little wide, if only for a moment. The tight way of his mouth loosened and the high hold of his shoulders appeared to sink slightly.

“Am I welcome here?” Cash asked.

Blaine’s tension snapped back, and he frowned. “You think you wouldn’t be?”

It was the logical assumption. “I don’t belong to this pack anymore. It is only right that I ask permission to come onto these grounds.”

“You always were a stickler for the rules,” Blaine replied, almost mocking. “I grant your request.” As he gave him the once over, his tension made the air thick and heavy. “You are looking well.”

Cash snorted at the ridiculous statement. “We don’t age. Why would I look any different?”

Blaine shrugged. “I figured you had taken to the mountains and were living as a wild man.” He looked over him again. “You look well, though. I am pleased by that.”

Cash nodded at the compliment, then asked, “And you—things been good?”

“Well enough,” Blaine replied. “The pack is strong. Any problems have been dealt with easily.”

“Glad to hear of it.”

Blaine’s tension had been building. His eyes were near slits, and his tone dropped an octave. Now, it was a low growl as he asked, “Have you seen your sister?”

“Just yesterday.” Cash’s voice came strong and unafraid. “I went to their home.”

“They well?” Blaine had begun to tremble slightly. His fists clenched by his sides. “The cubs?”

Cash squared himself, his teeth gritted in preparation. He'd known Blaine long enough to anticipate what was going to happen next. Blaine never disciplined with words—ever. He braced himself and responded with tight lips, “All doing fine.”

To an outsider, this conversation would be pleasant enough. To Cash, this was nothing more than total hell. Blaine and his conversations never revolved around small talk. Neither cared for it. It clearly displayed the hostility that lay between them.

Cash glanced back to the car. Rylie watched with her eyes glued to them. He needed to get on with this and face it dead on. If things between him and Blaine weren't resolved, he doubted Blaine would do all he could to help him. He looked back to Blaine in a challenge. “You have never been one to be tight-lipped, so get on with it.”

Blaine's eyes narrowed. “You want to have *that* conversation?”

“It's not a thing of want, but must have.”

Blaine nodded, his mouth pursed into a thin line, then in a move that was quicker than Cash could even register, landed a hard right hook into his jaw and sent him airborne.

The air made a whooshing sound as he continued to soar. From a distance, he heard the car door open, then Rylie screamed out his name. His back hit the ground first and his head followed with a sharp pain that stole his breath as a loud grunt escaped his mouth.

“Cash,” Rylie screamed out again.

He shot his gaze to her, not blind to the concern rushing across her face. The thought of her being protective over him made him smile. But when he heard Blaine's pounding footsteps toward him, he shut off all emotion and said, “Get back in the car—now.” To his total surprise, she didn't hesitate. Before he even finished his words, she was back in the car with the door closed. Either she had been raised by a powerful male influence, or she was subordinate. He wasn't sure which one he believed, and now wasn't the time to decide.

Blaine was now glaring over him. “You are a selfish fuck.”

“Everyone keeps on saying that,” Cash groaned as he peeled himself off the stone driveway.

Blaine reached down and yanked him up to bring them nose-to-nose. Their height was equal, and their weight was nearly identical. Blaine had said on more than one occasion that if Cash wanted to succeed him, he could do it easily. The role of Alpha, of course, interested him. The idea of taking it away from Blaine didn't. "You deserted your pack," Blaine roared. "Do you know the pain you caused?"

"The pain I caused?" Cash growled in return. "Whose pain?"

"The whole fucking pack." Blaine pulled him in closer now, his breath warm against Cash's face. "Not only did we lose Jaclyn. We lost you, too. The pack had to deal with that. They depended on you. You were as much an Alpha as I am to them, and you left them high and dry."

"They have you. They didn't need me."

Blaine's glare deepened. "After you left, they pined. The entire pack mourned Jaclyn, suffered through your sister's pain of losing a sister and a brother, then ached through your abandonment of them." He walloped Cash again, this time with an uppercut that sent his teeth rattling and the world spinning around him.

The second Cash hit dirt, he lunged to his feet, not giving into the pain. "Staying here would have been worse."

"You think?" Blaine pounced forward, sending them both tumbling backward.

Cash landed hard on his back, wrestled beneath him and blocked Blaine's attempts to pummel him to pieces. "I know, dammit," he shouted, breathless. "I would have only caused more pain."

"Fuck that." Blaine raised a knee and blasted Cash's stomach. "We all could have been healed together."

Cash keeled over and sucked in a breath in an attempt to not vomit. "I didn't want to be saved." His voice came out strangled. It took one more breath before he regained himself. He shot forward, kicked Blaine's shin and landed a punch against his kidney. "I wanted to go."

Blaine held his side as he limped forward. "And that is your failure. Your need to think only of yourself."

Apparently, the pain was an act. Seconds later, he ran forward, jumped on Cash and sent them crashing against the hood of the car. "I have no loyalty

to care about the pack,” Cash growled. His hands wrapped around Blaine’s face as he tried to push him away. “They are not mine to rule.”

“No...” Blaine grunted, pressing all his weight against Cash, “...loyalty? Your pack needed you.”

Cash held his breath, calling on all his strength to throw Blaine off, but it was impossible. Their strengths were too evenly matched. “I was no good for them,” Cash retorted. “It was better that way.”

“Better for you,” Blaine shouted, then his head came down on Cash’s.

Stars sparkled before Cash’s eyes. He slid off the hood of the car to land on the ground. Then, he gave his head a shake and a few more after that. Finally, when sense returned, Blaine sat a few feet away with blood dripping down his forehead.

Their gazes connected, Blaine growled, lunged forward, took him by the shirt and shook him. “Your pack needed you. You left them all.” His voice softened from his feral growl. “Including me.”

Cash had seen this look before in Blaine’s eyes. Disappointment. Blaine’s outrage wasn’t only Cash’s abandonment of the pack. It was that he’d chosen to not let Blaine in when he’d been suffering. A bond of friendship had been broken. Disgrace settled within him. At the time, his pain hadn’t acknowledged the thoughts of others. Now, he felt ashamed. “You have done much for me, Blaine,” he said in a whisper, his gaze focused on the stones below. “I owed you better.”

Blaine let out a long, slow breath, released his shirt, and sat back on his legs. “And there it is.” His voice returned to the soft nature Cash knew it to be.

Cash snapped his gaze up curiously. “There what is?”

Blaine gave a knowing look. “A small piece of the Cash I remember.”

A sudden drip on his nose diverted Cash’s attention. He, gave his nose a wipe, then examined his hand. It was exactly what he expected, blood. “Did you have to knock the sense into me?” he accused.

Blaine reached up to his head. “I planned to do it with my fist.” He stood and wobbled slightly. “When that didn’t work, my head seemed like a good alternative.” He reached his hand out to examine his own blood. “Fucking hurt.”

Cash rose to his feet. His hand squeezed tight against Blaine's, and he returned the hold. To wolves, this was a happy embrace. "Words would have sufficed."

Blaine knew better. "Not likely, Cash. You're thick headed." Then, he glanced over Cash's shoulder and nodded toward the car. "What have you brought with you?"

Cash followed his gaze to see Rylie watching with wide eyes, and she appeared to be laughing at them. "That, my friend, is a problem."

* * * *

Rylie watched the two burly men sort out their tiff. At first, she had been afraid for Cash, worried about him facing off with an Alpha. A reaction she thought odd. When the first hit came, she bolted from the car without thought and screamed as if her life was on the line. Sure, he'd been real nice to her, yes, he was sexy as all get-out, but to react with such force toward him startled her. Furthermore, he'd ordered her back to the car and she'd gone immediately. To trust his word so—she'd never experienced this before.

Her worries only lasted a moment. She soon recognized Blaine's anger came from love. His eyes weren't vengeful. They were pained. She'd seen it before. Having a good fist fight unruffled feathers much easier than a long conversation. Well, with men anyway.

After a quick introduction, Rylie now sat atop the hood they'd just fought against.

Blaine leaned forward, and inhaled deeply. Rylie froze. He smiled as he backed away. "Not from around here then?"

Rylie quietly let out a fearful breath. If Layne hadn't mated with her, she would have smelled like her father. Blaine would've recognized that a mile away. He would have known about Layne's win over her father, but Blaine wouldn't have scented him yet. He wouldn't recognize her as an Alpha's mate. She gave a soft smile. "Nope, I'm from Wyoming."

Blaine's gaze turned curious. "May I ask why you have come here in request of help and not to your own Alpha?"

“I hadn’t thought of it,” Rylie replied. “After my parents...” She gulped, then found some strength. “After they died, and after our mating ceremony, the second he left, so did I.”

Blaine’s eyes darkened. Apparently, Cash had told him the whole truth. He cleared his throat before he said, “Edwin, your Alpha, would have dealt with this wolf appropriately. If you wish, I can contact him.”

“No!” she shouted. Both men’s gazes swept with confusion. She laughed and quieted her tone. “No, I mean, I don’t wish to go back there.”

“You want to renounce the Wyoming pack?” Blaine asked.

She chortled as if that was even a question. “Very much so.”

Blaine gave her a look, which she only guessed was inquisitive. He was an Alpha, smart—worldly. There were holes in her story and she could see as he tried to piece it all together—the same look she’d seen come from Cash. Blessedly, instead of asking more, he said, “This mate of yours, do you think he will come after you?”

“From his past behavior,” Cash chimed in, “if he finds her, he’ll kill her.”

Rylie noticed that his voice held an air of protectiveness, and it raised strength within her. She glanced over to him. His gaze focused on hers and determination shined through his eyes as his lips set firmly. An urge to reach up, run her hand along his cheek to loosen those muscles, to lay her lips against his and kiss her gratitude, stole her thoughts. Warmth and wetness grew between her thighs as she imagined his lips, his breath, along her skin. Her body ached for him.

“This is a problem then,” Blaine commented, drawing Rylie away from her cravings.

She gave her head a shake and sat on her hands to ensure she didn’t act on those feelings. Her reaction to him was beyond shocking. Never had she met a man that stirred such emotions in her, or made her body so needy of him, and she hoped neither of the men had smelled her arousal. “A big problem,” she said, forcing her gaze back to Blaine.

He rubbed his hand across his jaw as he examined her. “You are welcome to join the Montana pack, and I would see to you finding employment to maintain yourself. That is not a concern. What concerns me is that this mate of yours has rights to you. If he came looking for you, I could not stop him.”

The truth of that sank her into a bottomless pit of despair. “I know...but...there has to be something.” She came very close to begging.

Blaine cocked his head, his brows furrowed in thought, then suddenly, those brows rose as if he’d latched onto a solution. “Cash,” he said.

“What?” Cash responded with a raised brow.

Blaine answered, “You have lost your mate. She doesn’t want hers—”

Cash raised his hand to stop him. “You cannot possibly mean?”

Apparently, he knew what Blaine hinted about, but Rylie hadn’t a clue. “Mean what?”

“Wolf bonds are not always created by a destined mate,” Blaine replied.

Yes, she knew this. Some mates came together out of true love, not from the soul bond. If a wolf longed for a mate long enough, and she never came, he would seek out one that suited him and the ceremony would be completed just the same. It would never be as strong as a soul bond. But it still held some of the same rules, to feel each other deeper, long for each other while apart. It just wasn’t as overwhelming.

Blaine continued. “A bond can be broken, but to do so, another bond must be formed.”

Rylie absorbed his words, attempting to make sense of it. Then, it dawned on her. “Me”—she pointed toward Cash—“him.” That was all the words her mouth and mind were capable of forming.

Blaine nodded with no hesitation. “I would never suggest such a thing if neither of you hadn’t found your mate, but since you both have—there is no worry as to that. This will break your bond with this mate of yours, set you free to join our pack, then you and Cash can part ways and go on with your lives. Think of it more as a friendship bonding than anything else.”

Rylie laughed nervously to hide the fact that the chance to heat up the sheets with Cash appealed to her. And her body responded appropriately. The warmth deepened, the wetness grew. She shifted on the hood to sit farther on her rump to alleviate the pressure between her thighs. Ignoring that feeling was of the utmost importance, and more than that, she was desperate to ensure Cash didn’t scent her desire. Before, it had only been an inkling. It could be hidden. Now, her arousal was thick and demanding.

“Okay, that is so ridiculous.” She glanced to Cash. He wasn’t laughing. He was intent, serious, and apparently thinking this over. His nostrils flaring, his eyes molten—he hadn’t missed her moment of interest. She adamantly kept her gaze on his nose to not see that burn in his eyes. “You can’t be honestly considering this?”

Cash shrugged, his voice deep. “It hadn’t occurred to me that this is a way to rid you of your problem. There is no reason not to help you in this regard. My mate is gone. I will never be granted another soul bond. Neither will you.” She finally looked up to meet his gaze, to see his brow was arched. “It is a way out.”

“But you don’t want me as a mate,” she gasped.

“You will be brought into safety,” Cash replied. “If you broke the bond, came into the Montana pack, your mate could not hurt you. It does make sense, Rylie.”

She wasn’t sure what stunned her more, hearing of this, or the fact that he agreed to it. For the life of her, she couldn’t see his reasoning behind it. Most wolves would never agree to this. A mate was considered treasure. It wasn’t taken lightly. “You...you would do that for me?”

Cash’s eyes softened, and a small smile lifted the corners of his mouth. “I have lived two years selfishly. Doing this would help you and might vindicate me.”

Blaine gave him a hard slap on the back, obviously approving of his line of thinking.

Rylie couldn’t wrap her head around this. “But what if you find someone that you love and want to mate with her, or what if I did?”

“Then, you can break the bond—just as you will do now,” Blaine replied. “It is a solution. A way to free you and bring you into safety.” Then, he looked to Cash. “However, there is a snag we will have to work out first.”

Cash arched a brow. “A snag?”

“If she wants to belong to the Montana pack, and she is your mate—”

Cash interrupted. “I have to belong to the Montana pack too.”

Blaine nodded, grinning. “You know it.”

Rylie attempted to find words to stop this, or even get them to explain this more, but she was stunned stupid. Suddenly, anger tore through her. Not

hers—Layne's. Her stomach turned and heat rushed through her. She gasped and keeled over against the hood of the car.

Cash immediately had her in his arms. "What is it?"

She accepted the anger within her and forced herself to see past it. She met Cash's gaze. "He knows I'm gone..."

Cash's worried his bottom lip. He gazed into her eyes so deeply she was left to wonder what he was looking for. Finally, after an agonizing silence, he said, "All right, call a gathering. Let's get this done."

Chapter Four

Blaine hadn't disappointed on the headcount. His request for members of the pack to come within the hour had gained nearly all of the Montana pack, including Cash's sister. Now, behind Blaine's home in his back garden under the late night sky, more than a hundred wolves had joined them. Cash suspected most of them were here to see him rejoin the pack. Add in a mate bond and it was a hell of a show.

The pack welcomed him back with open arms, which he suspected would be the case. He couldn't deny the fact the pack magic felt wonderful as it swept across him. To be alone for so long, now he was home again. A certain peace settled within him.

And the reason for all of this was the little woman presently hugging his sister. He snorted at the display. If he didn't know better, Taya acted like she'd just gained a sister. Not that the idea of having a mate didn't appeal to him. There was a feeling of rightness that lived in his heart, but Rylie wasn't emotionally his to keep. He had recognized desire in her, smelled it run thick through the air, but he could stir that reaction in most women. As for emotions, she hadn't shown an interest further than being grateful he was getting her out of a tight bind.

After their embrace, Taya left Rylie for Blaine to introduce her to the pack and strode toward Cash. When she reached him, she said, "Mated man."

"Nothing to get excited over." He reminded her. "It's only an arrangement to seal the broken bond with her mate."

Taya gave a knowing grin. "So you keep on saying."

Cash guffawed at his twin's mysterious look. "What the hell is that look for?"

Taya shook her head innocently, as if she knew something he didn't. "Oh please, you don't see it?"

"See what?" he asked curiously.

"That Rylie is smitten over you."

Cash arched a brow. "You say that about every woman I'm with."

“That’s because they always are.” Taya laughed and kissed his cheek. Then, her gaze became serious. “Now, let’s talk about tonight.”

“What about tonight?” Taya glanced to Rylie as she said, “You are going to have to be gentle with her.”

Cash followed her gaze. Rylie looked slightly uncomfortable as she was surrounded by women who began to drill her. He met his sister’s gaze again. “You are not about to instruct me in the ways of making love, are you?”

She nodded, totally unashamed. “You’ve never been with a woman like her. She has been through a lot.”

“I know that,” he snapped.

“I’m just saying, don’t go all tough guy on her.”

“Taya,” he snapped again. “I do not need my younger sister—”

“Only by ten minutes,” she injected.

He grinned at her stance on the matter. She never had enjoyed that he was older, and she pointed out as often as she could that it wasn’t by much. “I do not need my *younger* sister to tell me how to make love to a woman.”

She reached up and put her hand on his arm. “Just be tender with her.” Her hands rose to stop him when his mouth opened. “I’m not saying anything else, just that. Don’t bite my head off.”

His mouth closed, he leaned forward and kissed her cheek. “She’ll be fine.” So like his sister to worry of others. It was that quality he’d missed the most when he’d been away. Her tender heart could not be matched.

When he backed away, she gave him a warm smile. “It’s nice to feel you back in the pack.”

He nodded. Enough said. She would understand by the look in his eye that he felt the same.

Just then, Blaine’s voice came beside him. “Take her home, Cash.”

He spun around to meet his Alpha’s gaze. “Now?” His voice came out more hesitant than he liked. Never had bedding a woman been a problem, but Rylie was not like any other woman he had met. He didn’t want to disappoint her.

Blaine laughed. “You waiting for the sun to come up?”

He shook his head. Fuck, he was actually nervous. Him. Scared to death of a little woman. His hesitation lingered on the fact that Taya was right. She

did need someone to be gentle with her, considering what her experience had been. One thing Cash wasn't was a careful lover. He liked it hard, dirty and intense. His only hope was that he would control himself once he got her naked. "The cabin then?"

"That is your home," Blaine replied, and he didn't bother to hide the fact it thrilled him to say it.

Cash sighed, gave his sister a hug good-bye and left the grinning Blaine behind him. Rylie stood quietly in the midst of a hoard of women as they chatted their lives away. He smiled to himself, pleased to see she wasn't a gabber. Suddenly, it dawned on him there was nothing about her he didn't like. He hadn't seen a single flaw in her character. As he drew closer, she raised her head and connected with his gaze.

A sweet smile spread across her face, and his groin grew at the sight of it. It hadn't been long since he'd taken a woman, but the truth was, he had been more interested in their bodies than anything else—only slept with them when the need overtook him. With Rylie, there was a connection there, partly due to the mate bond they now shared, but more than that. Something he had yet to figure out.

When he reached the women, they all hushed. "I'm sorry to interrupt," he told the group. "But Rylie and I must be off." The women all giggled around him and Rylie blushed. A trait he thought endearing.

When he reached his hand out, Rylie took it with no uncertainty and laced her fingers within his. She kept her gaze to the ground as he pulled her away and began to walk down toward the cabin. When the crowd behind him erupted into loud hoots and hollers, Cash couldn't withhold his smile and joined the amusement by letting out a loud shout of laughter.

The walk toward the cabin was met with silence. The night air was crisp and the mountains stood like dark shadows around them. Rylie still had yet to look up, and even though Cash continued to look at her, demanding she acknowledge him, she never did.

Just past the lone standing maple tree, the small cabin—half wood, half stone—appeared. Warmth touched him to be back here. Never had he thought he'd return. Once at the door, he opened it and Rylie quickly stepped in. He followed in behind her and closed the door. His hand nearly

trembled on the handle. In response, he gripped it tightly, demanding that he get a hold of himself. With a deep breath, he turned around to find Rylie sitting on the bed, still not looking at him.

Blaine hadn't changed a thing about the cabin. The king-sized bed rested against the back wall with a thick patterned quilt resting atop, the kitchen off to the right, which held a simple oak table and crisp, white cabinets, and the living room sat to the left with the big screen TV angled in the corner surrounded by sage cotton couches. Jaclyn had decorated the space here—her touches in every piece of it. It had been cleaned recently, which also told him Blaine had been waiting for his return.

His first reaction startled him. He expected to feel misery seeing a part of Jaclyn again, but none of that swept through him. All that lived in him was happiness that he was home. He glanced back to Rylie, who still had yet to meet his eyes. “Get comfortable,” he told her. “I’ll be back.” Then, he headed in lengthy strides toward the bathroom.

Once there, the door slammed behind him, he walked to the white antique sink and grasped the sides with his hands. Slowly, he raised his head to the mirror. It'd been a long time since this image had stared back at him in this mirror. He noticed he'd changed, aged slightly. Lines surrounded his eyes that hadn't been there the last time he'd looked at himself from here. Without looking away, he turned the faucet on, then cupped the cold water in his hands. Lowering his head, he splashed the water against his skin.

He repeated the gesture a few times just to settle himself. Then, he looked back up to the mirror with water dripping off his face. “Be gentle,” he told himself firmly. He grabbed the hand towel, dried his skin, and threw it to the ground as he opened the bathroom door to make his way back out to Rylie.

The moment he cleared the door, he froze—stone solid.

Rylie lay on the bed, naked. Her sun-kissed skin glowed against the white sheets, and her long mocha hair lay around her body as if to accentuate her beauty. Cash ran his gaze up from her toes. Long, slender legs filled his gaze, which came as a surprise since she was so petite. Her hips curved around a belly that had a little pot, which he found undeniably sexy. Her waist was small since her body was mostly made up of legs. Her breasts would fill his

palms perfectly, and her nipples were dark, small and presently erect, as if inviting his mouth to suck on them. His cock went from soft to hard so fast, he groaned.

Sense returned to him and he spun around, turning his back to her. "Put your clothes back on," he demanded.

Rylie gasped.

He waited for the shuffling to stop before he turned around. When he did, he found her clothed, head bowed, knees drawn up and cheeks entirely crimson.

He swore and instantly went to her. His hand went under her chin and he brought her gaze to his, horrified to find tears. He swore again, reached for her arms, took them away from her legs and brought her up to stand in front of him. "I want the luxury of undressing you myself," he told her.

Her embarrassment melted away to confusion. "You want to take off my clothes?"

"Indeed, I do." Rage flared through Cash. He should find this mate of hers and tear him to pieces, just for this very reason. Now, he knew really how bad her experience with love-making had been. The fucker hadn't even bothered to undress her.

"Why?" She sounded as baffled as she looked.

Cash stepped in closer to her. The warm, soft curves of her body pressed against his. His cock settled along her stomach and he did nothing to hide it. She needed to know how much he wanted her.

At first contact, she gasped. "Oh." Her grin came shyly. "You want me."

He arched a brow. "Intensely so." Then, he reached for the hem of her shirt and raised it until it came over her head. He followed by removing her bra. "I like the way your body teases me when I get to remove your clothing." His tone had deepened and he hadn't heard his voice so aroused in a long time.

Her eyes went wide. "My body teases you?"

He nodded, his jaw clenched tightly. With her bra on the floor, he ran his hand across her shoulder to her neck, down the center of her chest, pleased to notice she shivered beneath his touch. Her eyes grew darker as he traced the way of her body. Once at her waist, he tucked his finger beneath the rim

of her jeans to let her adjust to his hand being there. He wanted her ready. She was close, but he needed to be patient. To encourage her, he brought his other hand up to her chin, tilted her mouth up and pressed his lips against hers.

He discovered Heaven. Her kisses were exactly what he expected to find. Soft. He leaned back and gave her nose a little rub with his, inviting her to want more of him. She didn't disappoint as her mouth angled up toward him, and he didn't make her reach any further. His lips met hers again. This time, he deepened the kiss, pressing in hard and lightly licking out for permission. Her mouth immediately parted and his tongue swept with hers in a slow, intimate embrace.

When she backed away from him, he let her, only because he knew he would get more. If he thought that was the last, her lips never would have left his. Her lips were parted, her eyes hooded, and her desire came rich with lust. His cock stiffened further and the strain made him reach down to adjust himself.

She hadn't missed the move. "You look uncomfortable," she whispered, reaching for his shirt, pulling it up. He would have let her undress him, but he doubted she could reach high enough to finish the job. In a quick move, he had his T-shirt over his head and dropped it to the floor. Her tiny hands ran the lines of his abs up to his chest as her eyes followed the path. When she reached for the button of his pants, his cock throbbed. With a flick, he was free from his pants as they settled at his ankles. "Oh," she gasped.

Cash glanced down to his erection. Fuck, it was harder than steel and looked as strained as it felt. He glanced back up to her with an arched brow. "Problem?"

"No," she said in an exhaled breath. "You're just big."

He grinned, his brow lowered. "Is that a concern?"

"It might be," she said, reaching toward him. Her hand moved slowly in trepidation. When she took him in her hand, his breath hissed through his teeth as she began to stroke him softly. "Does that feel good?" she asked.

"You think it wouldn't?" He chuckled huskily. She shrugged. "You've never touched a man?"

She blushed. "No—never."

He wouldn't have her embarrassed. It pleased him he was the one teaching her this. "Yes, it feels amazing when you do that."

She smiled, raised her other hand to his hip and pulled him forward as she sat on the bed. The move helped him out of his shoes, then his pants. For a woman who had never pleased a man with her hand, she held some talent. Instead of just using one hand, she used two and the opposing sensations had his hips thrusting forward with each stroke.

"I see you like that," she said proudly.

Hell, she should have been proud. His gaze was focused on her hands working his cock in a way that pleased her. When he looked away from her hands and met her gaze, the fire burning in her eyes, the beauty of her, all of it made him step back. The sexy woman before him almost made him come by one glance.

She immediately grasped his waist to stop his retreat. Her hand tightened around his cock as she continued to stroke him. With an innocence he found endearing, she glanced up to him. "Can I lick it?"

Words could not form in his mouth. All he could do was nod and watch as her wet, slick tongue swept across the head of his cock. His head fell back as he groaned deeply.

* * * *

Rylie's tongue hit the silky, salty liquid on the end of his erection and she drew it back into her mouth to savor the taste of him. Nerves may have been present at first, but as he watched her with powerful eyes, ran his hand along her body, and kissed her with enough passion to stop her heart, nerves had left her.

She had been longing for this. Since she'd turned eighteen, she had been waiting to feel a man, to be turned on like this, and now that she was experiencing it, she was enthralled. She enjoyed the fact that her movements made his hips thrust forward and his eyes darken with pleasure. But it was more than that. It was him.

Their mate bond only solidified her attraction to him and she could spend hours doing just this. Lord, he was sexy. The problem, she wasn't a

dreamer. The situation was only to help her. He had lost his mate, and he had already loved. He wanted nothing of her except this night of pleasure. She could only hope when the time came, she would be able to let go of him without showing just how much she wanted to stay.

Her mouth lowered back to the tip of his erection as she brought the head of him into her. She sucked while she took as much of him in her mouth as she possibly could. His groans above her came loud as he twined his fingers gently through her hair to guide her, to teach her the way to do this. Long, slow strokes of her mouth played with him, teasing him, enticing him, and when she joined her hand below her mouth, his body vibrated in response.

Only three more plays of her mouth, and he stepped back, nearly shouting. "Stop."

"No," she said, firmly, grasping his hips with both hands as she brought her mouth back to him. In quick, fast movements, she sucked, pulled her cheeks in around him and gave him all she had.

His hips began to follow her movements, and his hands tightened around her head. His groans came louder with each pull of her mouth. His body trembled as his breathing increased into near pants, then her mouth filled with his release—a sweet, salty liquid that washed down her throat as she swallowed it greedily.

Slowly, she released her mouth and lifted her gaze. His head was bowed, eyes closed. Then, they snapped open. For the first time in her life, she saw the wolf within the man, exposed and raw. Hungry with pure animal need.

Quickly, he lifted her from the bed into his arms. He kissed her, tasted every part of her mouth, not caring for a moment that his seed had just been deposited there. Her body came tight against his semi-hard erection. He lowered her down on the bed, shifting her into the middle, then came over top of her, leaving her mouth to kiss her neck, her shoulders, all over her, tasting her skin as if he needed to learn every piece of her.

He reached for her hands, slowly raising them over her head and locking them with one hand. After a grin of promise, he kissed his way down to her breasts where her taut nipples eagerly waited his attention.

With a groan, he ran his face across each nipple, almost as a way to introduce them to his closeness. Moments later, he took one into his mouth while his hand played and tweaked the other. He drew the tight bud into his mouth and Rylie arched upwards. Arousal rushed through her. She fought against his hands to grab onto his head, demanding more, but he held her firm.

With his mouth still at her nipple, he lowered his free hand, undid her jeans, reached in her panties, then brought his hand down to her warmth. He groaned deeply as he ran his fingers along the wetness and up her folds.

Her hips arched upwards as he found her little nub and began to circle it. She gasped. Never had her body experienced anything like this. When she played with herself, she never had this sensation from it. She squirmed, moaned, panted like a wild animal as he pressed against her clit in a way that could make her forget her own name.

Just when she thought she could take no more, he slid in a finger inside her, then another, and she was undone. He brought his mouth back up to hers. His lips became demanding as he worked his fingers within her body. Again, she fought to free herself from his hold, but it was pointless. He was in control of her body now.

Her climax began to peak, a release she couldn't even fathom. No orgasm she'd experienced alone equaled what she felt now. Before she could relish in it, he removed his hand from inside her, gave her clit a minute more of attention, which left her shaking beneath him, then brought his hand out of her jeans.

His gaze connected with hers. He let go of her arms and moved between her legs. He reached up, tucked his hands under the rim of her jeans and began to pull them off. She raised her hips to assist him, and moments later, she was left exposed. Her knees came together and rested on his lap.

"Don't be afraid," he said softly, running his hands up her calves until he came to her knees, where he encouraged her to open for him.

Doing as he asked, she spread herself wide. His gaze hit the center of her for a long moment, then it snapped up. If she had any doubt that he wouldn't be pleased by the sight of her, those worries instantly vanished. His dark, hooded eyes declared she was beautiful.

With a deep groan, he lowered himself between her thighs and ran his tongue over her sensitive flesh. Startled by the intensity, she sat upright and grasped his head. This was a man with a purpose. He had been so gentle with her to this point. Now, that care no longer applied. His only job was to make her come, and by God, she was going to.

His mouth closed around her clit. He sucked hard, circled it, flicked it with his tongue. She was left to quiver, scream, nearly laugh as her mind was overcome with pleasure.

Suddenly, his lips connected with hers, and only then did the world come back to her. Her release was intense enough she hadn't even known she was in it. The scent of woman came strong through her nose as his tongue swept against hers in rough demand. Her arousal heightened—her climax lived on his mouth. It made her want more.

He brought his hips close to hers. She raised them to meet him. Gently but swiftly, he entered her. Pain stole her breath for a few moments as her body adjusted to his girth. But as he pulled out slightly and slid back in, pleasure won over anything else.

Their mate bond was completed.

A warm, happy feeling washed through her as Layne's presence evaporated and Cash's settled in. Even though she knew this wasn't forever, she let herself believe it now. Believe that she belonged to him, that his face was what she would wake up to and that he would be there to always protect her.

His forehead rested against hers as he relished in the moment of the bond just as she had. Then, his hand cupped her cheek and his eyes locked in on hers as he began to thrust. Slow and sure. She moaned. His groans mirrored hers. The scent of desire and sex came heavy in the air as his thrusts began to quicken.

Her mind continued to swirl with rightness. Her heart pounded against her chest, and sweat formed between their skin as his thrusts grew more urgent.

"Can you take more?" he growled.

"Hell yes," she shouted.

Her words barely got out before he went hard, fast—the bed beating against the wall. She had no control now. Keeping her eyes open was impossible. Her screams of ecstasy couldn't be stopped. Now, all that lived were two bodies in the heat of a moment, only existing in a complete and total state of bliss.

Chapter Five

Cash pulled Rylie in closer, spooned her body as she lay sated in his arms. Her scent of summer flowers filled him as his nose rested against the soft skin of her neck.

His selfish reasons kept her here. It had been years since he'd cradled a woman in his arms and the feel of her completed him. Her breath grew deeper as she was swept away to sleep. He may have joined her if his mind hadn't been so captivated by his thoughts. As much as he understood this mating was out of convenience and she didn't belong to him, for the moment, he had let himself believe that she did.

He deserved that little bit of luxury.

His moment of bliss abruptly ended when the scent of wolves came sharp through his nose, equaled by the raw stench of anger. He lifted his head in the exact moment the front door slammed open. Rylie gasped and shot up in bed. Cash followed.

"What have you done?" A man shouted, lunging forward in lengthy strides.

Rylie scrambled to pull the blankets up over her naked skin. "Layne...I—I—"

Fuck. Cash sighed to himself at the scent that came from this wolf. It was unmistakable. In a second, the reality of Rylie's situation dawned on him and every unanswered question blasted into his mind. He glanced at Rylie. "Your former mate is an Alpha?" He felt much more irritated with her than his tone let on.

"I—I—" she sputtered, glancing between Layne and Cash.

For one moment, she let down all of her walls and Cash witnessed something he hadn't expected to see. She looked to him for help. Not only that, but in the presence of Layne, she should be frightened. She wasn't. Her gaze formed a question. Did he care enough to protect her?

Blaine quickly entered through the door, out of breath. Apparently, he'd just run like a bat out of hell to get here. "What is the meaning of this?" he shouted at Layne.

Layne stood, shaking, trembling with the need for revenge. “I was about to ask that same fucking question.”

Blaine’s gaze swept with confusion then, just as Cash experienced, awareness came to him. His expression not only showed remorse, but worry as he looked to Rylie. “You were mated to an Alpha?”

She nodded. Tears filled her eyes. “He killed my parents—he—he was horrible to me.”

Her tears ate at Cash and he had an urge to protect her. But Blaine had it right. Cash was a stickler for the rules. Her betrayal to her Alpha was not something he could interfere with. What she had done was the gravest of mistakes and would come with severe consequences. She had sealed her own fate.

Blaine stepped in closer, his tone soft but firm. “If you had told me the truth to this situation, I would not have welcomed you.”

“Damn right you wouldn’t have,” Layne roared. “She is my mate, and now, what is left? A broken bond.” He pointed at Cash. “I demand you destroy him for taking what was mine.”

Cash sighed, throwing the blanket off him. He reached down and pulled on his jeans, then stood. He nodded toward the door. “Mind waiting outside so Rylie can get dressed?”

“Fucking right I mind,” Layne growled. “She is mine. It is my right to see her nude.” He lunged forward to grab Rylie’s arm and she screamed out. “Put some fucking clothes on, you slut.”

Cash gritted his teeth, but held himself firm. His mind swirled with confusion. The way Layne handled her, spoke to her, was enough to make him crazy with rage. But he knew his place. What she had done was wrong. He took a quick glance at Blaine, who held a look that surprised him. His eyes spoke of bewilderment and shock.

Rylie quickly dressed as tears ran down her face. Once presentable, she sat back on the bed and kept her gaze to the ground.

Blaine cleared his throat slightly before he spoke. “What are you planning to do with her?”

Layne grabbed Rylie by the neck, which caused her to release another squeal. “I’m returning to Wyoming with her immediately and she will die for her betrayal of me.”

Blaine let out a soft breath, then asked, “You are set in this decision?”

Layne nodded. “A gathering has already been called.”

Cash’s mind had trouble comprehending all this. Her betrayal in wolf culture did deserve death. This was their way—their rules. He had never once doubted the method of how they had done things. He’d upheld the oath their kind lived by. Now, he hesitated. She was not deserving of this fate.

Rylie’s eyes lifted to Cash’s as if she’d read his mind. “I deserve this,” she whimpered, then her voice came cold. “I would rather die than return to him.”

“And so you will,” Layne roared as he gathered her up and dragged her from the cabin.

The door slammed closed. Cash’s breath gasped out. She was gone. Forever. The woman had come so quickly into his life and was removed just as fast.

“For fuck’s sake, Cash.” Blaine stepped forward, took him by the shoulders and shook him. “Where have you gone?”

Cash shook his head, confused. “What are you going on about?”

“You just let another man walk in and take your woman—your fucking mate—to her death.” Then, he sucker-punched him and sent Cash straight to the ground.

“She’s not mine,” Cash retorted, grasping his throbbing jaw.

“Wanna bet?” Blaine retorted. “My hands were tied here. I might have welcomed her, but interfering would have been seen as a challenge to Layne for his status. Something I doubt my mate would agree with. She needed you to defend her, and you have failed her.”

Cash jumped to his feet. “I am powerless here. You, of all, should understand the rules. She has betrayed an Alpha. What am I to do?”

Blaine lunged forward, knocking them both to the ground. “What are you to do?” he shouted, attempting to get another hit. “Are you that dense?” Then, he pinned him in a hold that left him unable to move. “Fate has

stepped in and given you a second chance and you just let her walk out the door to die.”

With the inability to move, Cash’s instinct to fight fled him and now Blaine’s words began to settle in. This little woman had done the unimaginable. She had made him smile, made him need, feel something other than his pain. It was she that had brought him home. It was she who had bandaged up his soul.

Blaine’s hold loosened when Cash went limp in his arms, defeated. He flipped him over and met his gaze as he held his shirt in his hands. “Now I ask again—where have you gone?”

Cash grinned, his brow arched arrogantly. “I’m right fucking here.”

A slow smile spread along Blaine’s face. Then, he gave the side of Cash’s face a hard smack before he jumped off him. “It’s about bloody time.”

* * * *

Rylie had remained silent during the drive back to Cody. The scent of Layne’s rage was enough to keep her quiet. What she had done was the highest betrayal to werewolves, and she had even upped the ante since her mate was an Alpha.

There was no doubt in her mind she deserved what was coming to her. Her father had raised her within these rules. She knew this could have been her fate when she’d left. She accepted that. That was not what stole her thoughts. It was Cash who kept her mind reeling. It was wrong of her to let herself believe there was more to his feelings for her than just pity over her situation. The way he’d looked at her, how he’d made love to her...she had believed he cared. Obviously, that assumption had been wrong. He had let her leave without a moment’s hesitation—not a single word to stop it.

And it broke her heart into a million pieces.

Now, surrounded by the pack of Wyoming, she sat at Layne’s feet on the cold grass and never had she felt so alone. She’d committed the unthinkable and the disgust on every face and in the words spoken here only proved it.

Layne raised his hands for the crowd to quiet. They responded immediately. “We all know why we are here. Rylie has condemned herself for her betrayal of me and her pack.”

Loud shouts of agreement ran through the field next to what had once been her family’s home. Layne had taken it as his own now. A stone bungalow that had seen five generations of her bloodline. Now, nothing of that happiness resided here.

“Rylie.” A scream cut through the cheering crowd. Rylie raised her head to find Devan restraining Chloe. “You can’t do this,” she shrieked. “Stop this now.”

Layne growled at Chloe. Devan instantly covered Chloe’s mouth with his hand and dragged her from the field to vanish from sight as she screamed and cried, kicking madly.

Rylie gulped. Chloe, she would miss. But her fate was written. No one could save her now.

Or so she thought.

“I agree, this is going to stop,” a deep voice rang out. “Now.”

The crowd, including Rylie, snapped her head toward the voice. Cash, Blaine, and some others of the Montana pack were striding toward them.

“Blaine,” Layne roared. “What is the meaning of this?”

Blaine shook his head, grinning. “It is not for me to answer.”

A moment later, Cash reached Rylie. He cupped his hands under her arms and pulled her up. Then, he took her into his arms and kissed her. Her breath was lost as his lips came with force, almost in a show of strength. Meant as an apology—one she heard loud and clear.

“He should not have taken you. That will never happen again,” he growled against her lips.

As he backed away, she couldn’t wrap her head around this. “You’re here...for me?” Her voice was as shocked as she felt inside.

Cash arched a brow and smiled. “You are my mate.”

Tears filled her eyes. The one line spoken from his lips filled her with so much joy she could only cry in response. Her heart grew with enough love she thought it might burst wide open.

Suddenly, Layne shouted, “Release her!”

Cash placed Rylie into the arms of Blaine, who wrapped both arms around her tightly as if to protect her. She immediately sank against him, feeling the safety only found in a man. Her body trembled from a thousand emotions she still couldn't get a grip on. Too much had happened for her mind to keep up.

Cash turned to the crowd, which included Layne. "I challenge Layne for Alpha of Wyoming." Whispers of shock and disbelief ran over the crowd.

Layne's gaze narrowed. "Is that so?"

Cash's nod came harsh. "Do you accept my challenge?"

"I do," Layne declared, and he stepped forward. His shoulders rose to show his size. He shifted, as did Cash.

In the wake of two men were two strong wolves. Layne was black and deathly. Cash, a mixture of sand and white. Both powerful in height and weight, ears pinned to their heads, eyes glowing, and teeth barred in a growl.

As if hit by cold water, Rylie awakened to the realization of what was about to happen. Her heart may have been overwhelmed by his claim of her, to know she was not alone in these feelings of love, but now Cash was in danger. "No, you have to stop him," she shouted at Blaine. "He could die." *Die for me.*

Blaine tightened his arms around her. "He won't." His voice held strong and sure.

She would have said more, argued more, demanded that this stop, but the fight had already begun.

Fur.

Teeth.

Growls.

Blood.

Rylie couldn't watch. She spun around into Blaine's hold and he held her tighter. His body was tense, trembling as if he was holding himself back from stepping in and assisting his friend.

Howls of pain made her raise her hands to her ears. Cash looked strong enough to defeat Layne, but then again, so had her father, and he was now dead. If his life was lost here, she couldn't bear to watch him die. Never had she needed anyone as much as she needed him.

Blaine reached up, cupped her head, and brought her as close to him as he could. He was protecting her, just as an Alpha should one of his wolves. Men shouted, encouraging the fight. Rylie wanted this to be over. Cash had come here to protect her, had come to prove himself as her mate.

Something she had longed for had finally happened. She belonged to someone she wanted, someone who loved her, and who'd die to keep her. But now, she could lose him.

Loud howls shook right into her soul. She hadn't known Cash long enough to recognize his howl. One of the wolves was growing weaker. She couldn't tell if it was him. The mate bond held strong, but that meant nothing. It would only diminish at the moment of death.

Needing to know, she turned her head away from Blaine's chest. Blood drenched the grass, as well as pieces of wolf. As her gaze followed along the ground, relief came instantly. Layne was panting, his back legs dragging behind him as Cash circled him, stalking, his lips raised to show bloody teeth.

A second later, it was over.

Layne was dead.

Cash shifted. His voice came out powerful and demanding. "Acknowledge me as Alpha."

The pack of Wyoming shifted, the magic shedding their clothes. Rylie followed bowing down in submission to her Alpha. But soon after, a finger under her furry chin brought her gaze up. Cash had a smile that sent desire, love and a lifetime of happiness through her. "My mate will never submit to me or to anyone."

Her shift came instantly. Tears spilled from her eyes. "You saved me."

Cash reached up, cupped her cheek, and ran his thumb across her skin. "Our bond may not have been destined, but it holds just as true—two souls joining to save each other." He lowered his mouth to hers and whispered against her lips, "And you have saved mine, Rylie. For that, my heart will always be yours." With his mouth still on hers, he lifted her into his arms. Her legs straddled his waist as her arms wrapped around his neck.

Here, was safe.

Chapter Six

Rylie felt Cash's muscles tremble beneath her hands while she felt her way along his strong shoulders. She could hardly believe how this had all played out. He had come for her. She still wasn't sure if she accepted this as true. But she ignored her disbelief and focused on him. And just how happy she was at this moment.

Layne, the man who had killed her family, was dead. She was no longer in his clutches and she had Cash.

His mouth was firm and demanding against hers, unlike the sweet touch she had experienced before. And that was perfectly fine with her.

Suddenly, though, a scream tore through the air around her. Cash released her mouth and glanced to the side as he continued to stride forward. Chloe ran toward them with Devan in tow. Tears tracked down her cheeks.

"You're okay...you're here." She finally plowed into them. Her arms wrapped around Rylie's back so she hugged Cash, too. "What happened...how did this happen?"

Cash chuckled. "The how would be me."

"The new Alpha," Devan said as he approached. Once there, he bowed his head in a proper way. "My allegiance is with you."

"Appreciated," Cash responded.

"He came for me, Chloe." Rylie couldn't hide the happiness in her voice, and she didn't want to. "He fought Layne."

"And Layne's dead?" Chloe's eyes went wide.

"He is," Cash responded with a nod. "And if you all wouldn't mind, I'd like a moment alone with my mate."

"Your mate?" Chloe's eyes grew even wider. Her tears dried up instantly and a smile crossed her face.

Rylie rejoiced in all of this. When she'd first run from Chloe's car toward the unknown, she never would have expected this outcome. Everything had become a dream and one she didn't want to wake up from. "His mate," she whispered, staring into Cash's gaze.

Cash's eyelids sank, and the lust nearly oozed from him. Instead of saying another word to her, he placed his lips back on hers. She felt his need in the

greedy way he kissed her. But the most obvious thing was the hardness that rested in his pants.

The wind rushed by her body as he began to walk forward to leave a chuckling Devan and Chloe behind. She gripped his shoulders and tightened her legs around his hips as he ravished her mouth.

The front door to her bungalow opened as he breezed through and slammed it behind them. The scent of home came around her and she sighed into his mouth.

Cash broke the kiss to grin at her. "This is your home, as it's always been. Now we'll make a life for ourselves here."

"And what a good life it'll be." She smiled in return. Glancing around, she saw all the familiar items that brought her comfort. The hardwood floors, the wood paneling, all the plush furniture that her mother loved. Tears couldn't help but form in her eyes at the memory of her parents. She still had yet to deal with their deaths, and maybe because so much had happened she'd forgotten her pain.

Now it returned.

As tears trailed down her cheeks, Cash set her on her feet and brushed the droplets away with his thumbs. "We'll deal with this pain in your heart. But I swear to you, from this day forward, life will get better. We'll remember your family with the honor they deserve."

A sob escaped her mouth, but before she could say a word, Cash took her lips again in the most demanding of ways. His strength poured around her and she drank every bit of it in. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pushed her up against the wall.

She gasped as her back connected with the flowery wallpaper. He ravished her mouth as his hands ran along her cheeks in a fierce show of territory. All she could do was follow his movements and bask in this glorious man.

Suddenly, he tore himself away. His gaze focused on hers and it left her breathless. How incredibly sexy he looked. Arousal so scorching hot, it was like a molten flow through her. "I must warn you." He panted slightly. "I am not in control of myself now."

That was music to her ears. "I wouldn't want it any other way."

He drew in a long, deep breath. Then a growl that was much more wolf than human sounded low in his throat. “You’ve got no idea what you just unleashed.” He grabbed her shirt, pulled it over her head, and made quick work of her pants so she was only left in her panties and bra.

His gaze stayed focused on hers, so intense it made foreplay unnecessary. She was soaked beneath those panties and knew by the burn in his eyes he was aware of it. He gave a little grin before he placed his mouth against her neck and began to lick, bite, and make his way all over her upper torso.

At her breasts, he squeezed tightly, earning a little squeal as her need for him multiplied. His thumbs ran over her already hard nipples and he rolled the tight knots beneath his touch.

He ran his hands down her midsection as he devoured her neck with his mouth. Nothing was gentle about the way he came at her, and nothing in her wanted him to be. She was panting, moaning and running her hands through his hair to keep him close to her.

Just as he reached to give her breasts a final squeeze, he pulled her bra down to expose them and kissed the top of each breast. As her breasts sat atop her bra, exposed, he latched onto a taut knot and circled his tongue around it before he sucked deeply. Rylie nearly lost her mind. The throbbing between her legs thumped harder and the wetness spread immeasurably.

This was good, but she needed more, and squirmed against him to show him as much.

Taking the hint, Cash ran his hands over her hips and gripped her ass. Then, he lifted her up around him. He carried her to the staircase where he sat her down on the third step and spread her legs wide.

He didn’t waste a second as he tore her panties off, then lowered his mouth to her warmth. Her head fell back. A sigh poured from within and a shiver erupted in her that touched her very soul.

* * * *

Cash could spend a lifetime between his mate’s thighs. The taste of her was incredible and her scent drove him mad with desire. Every squirm she made, the sounds that came from her mouth, tested his control.

She didn't hesitate to let him hear her pleasure. Moans, gasps, pants—it all just came free from her mouth. Every time he met her clit with his tongue, she quivered beneath his mouth, and it made his cock jump.

The strain against his pants became almost unbearable and he wanted nothing more than to free himself.

Apparently, Rylie had the same wish.

She put her foot on his chest and pushed slightly to back him away. "I need you now. No more waiting."

"Enough said." While he removed his shirt, she unbuckled his belt and got to work on the button and zipper of his pants. Once free, he kicked his clothing away and stood naked in front of her. Her hand latched around him and gave a few steady strokes.

Now it was he who let his moan free.

Her small hand worked him in a way that was meant to make him come. But he wouldn't have that now. No, he needed to be deep inside of her when he deposited his seed. And by that smoldering gaze of hers, she was just as needy.

He pulled away from her hand and grabbed onto her arms so that she stood with him. He let his cock press against her stomach so she understood what she did to him. How she made him go wild with desire.

His mouth came against hers, as he needed to kiss her again. The way he planned to take her wouldn't give him access to her mouth and he wanted to indulge himself for a little while. She melted against him, so willingly, and that made the wolf inside him howl in response. So responsive. So giving to what he asked. He couldn't have found himself a better mate to spend his days with. And he could hardly wait to show her just how grateful he was to have found her.

After a few more swipes of his tongue, he backed away to see a lustful woman before him. Her eyes were so hooded with desire, he was sure she would comply with anything he asked of her now.

"Turn around." His voice came out rough and full of huskiness.

She immediately responded, which only made his Alpha applaud her obedience. With her soft back against his chest, he reached forward to cup

her breasts in his hand and tweaked her nipples in his fingers. As good as this was, his hand yearned to be somewhere else.

He ran his hands down to her hips and moved them toward her pussy. He swore he could feel the heat from her body as he drew nearer. When he reached her clit, it was scorching hot. The throb she suffered could be felt on his fingertip and that only delighted him.

“You’re so close, aren’t you?” He swirled his finger, pushed against her clit, and earned a whole body shudder from her.

“God, yes, don’t stop.” Her breath gasped as her head fell back against his shoulder.

“I won’t. I never will.” He lowered his head so that her mouth was right by his ear. This was something he wanted to hear, needed to remember. The sound of her climaxing by just his simple touch.

His other hand closed around her hip to steady her as he felt her wobble slightly. Her legs trembled as he continued to circle her clit. She was close, yet he knew she needed more to bring her over the edge. So, he gripped her hip tighter, gritted his teeth, then went as fast as his hand would allow over her clit. His quick movements had her screaming out and shaking all around him.

Then, her voice froze. Her muscles tightened and Cash rejoiced in feeling her climax beneath his hand.

He cupped her warmth while she came down from her release. Her breath whooshed from her mouth as she turned to jelly in his arms. Now, she was ready for him. He was going to draw on the orgasm she’d just had and amplify it.

Truth was, he couldn’t wait himself.

His cock was rock hard, pulsating for him to have his own release.

When her breath returned to normal levels, he released his hand from her pussy and raised it up so it came to her thigh. He grasped her leg and placed it on the second step so her foot was flat on the wood and gave him the access he was looking for. His other hand lifted to her back where he pushed her gently so her hands rested on either side of her foot on the stairs.

With her in the right position, he brought his hand to his cock to guide it toward her entrance. Knowing she was still new to this, he was gentle when he entered her. Gave her time to accept him.

He pushed through her silky skin and was elated to feel how wet she was. His cock was drenched in her juices and his groan echoed how marvelous the sensation was.

“This is my home,” he said in a purr. “Right here is where I belong.”

Her only response was a shuddering sigh.

It was the sign he needed as an indicator that she wasn't in pain and that she was ready for him. Without further hesitation, he gripped her ass in his hands and gave a hard thrust against her. Rylie squealed, her back arched, and Cash grinned.

Oh, this was going to be fun.

Leaning down, he placed a kiss on her naked shoulder. A sweet embrace before he showed her just what he was capable of. She sighed as she turned her face toward him. He raised himself up and kept his gaze focused on her expression that looked slightly uncomfortable. “Are you all right?”

“No, why are you waiting?” Her voice came out full of impatience.

He wouldn't make her wait another second.

His hands, which were presently on her delectable ass, lowered to grip the back of her thighs. Then, he slowly brought himself out of her pussy, every inch of him gripped by her wet flesh.

With a groan, his fingers dug into her skin as he delivered hard thrusts.

Skin smacked against skin.

Sounds of their pleasure roared through the house they would now call home. Her pussy began to pulsate around him. Her inner walls began to clench against him. His movements weren't as fluid because she wouldn't allow it. He needed to thrust in hard, use more of his strength to come at her since her body made it more difficult to enter her.

“I'm going to come,” she shouted unnecessarily. He felt her pussy clamp down on him, freeze with her impending release.

He was right there with her.

“Do it then,” he growled. “Give it to me.”

And she did.

But she wasn't the only one lost in the throes of complete satisfaction. As she shuddered all around him, his balls drew up tight against his body. His shout ricocheted off the walls, his growl rumbling low as his come spewed from his cock. Blessedly, her release hit her and her pussy eased up on the pressure against him. The moment it did, his orgasm hit, and he roared.

He kept himself seated deep within her while his cock pumped out. And he finally let out a deep breath as he relished the slow ebb of his own climax.

A few moments later, Rylie squirmed against him and it drew Cash back to the moment. "Wow." She laughed, breathless.

He leaned down over her, to protect her, to shelter her. All that lived within him. "Wow is right."

"So, that's what I have to look forward to?"

"That, and so much more." He kissed the soft part on her shoulder, and declared the promise he would forever work to live up to. His duty was to her, to the wolves he now lead, and to the life he'd been given as a second chance.

Here, was happiness.

The End

About the Author

Stacey Kennedy is an avid lover of the paranormal romance and urban fantasy genres. If she isn't plugging away at her next novel or tending to her two little ones, she's got her nose deep in a good book. She lives in Ontario, Canada with her husband. Be sure to drop her a line at www.staceykennedy.com. She loves to hear from her readers.