

Alpha
By
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The first time Callie saw Luke Hayes, her hackles rose. A cowbell clanked against the door of the Johnson Bar & Grill as he swaggered in, all tall shoulders, shaggy black hair, and ice blue eyes.

“Want me to take this one?” Millie drawled. Millie was a tough Texas broad who’d worked at the grill since Callie’s parents opened the place. Her weathered face and graying ponytail spoke of practicality and long hours outdoors.

Callie felt the interloper’s presence like a bonfire scorching her skin. “I’ve got it.” She took a deep breath and approached the stranger. “Get you a drink?”

“Glenfiddich on the rocks.”

Callie raised an eyebrow as she poured. “Not much call for this in Ryan. That’s six bucks.”

He slid his platinum card across the bar. “I’ll start a tab.”

She ran her thumb over the raised letters. “Sure, Luke.”

His hand flashed out and grabbed her wrist. Callie glared and her nostrils twitched; outsiders never touched her that way.

A smile softened his face as he released her. “Don’t I get to know your name?”

The warmth of his caressing gaze did her in. “I’m Callie.”

“Let me buy you a drink, Callie.” His slow grin shredded the remains of her modesty, and the low rumbling of his voice made her insides quiver. She was hyper-aware of his musky scent, the curve of his lips, and how his hair waved across his forehead.

At the other end of the bar, Millie slammed the beer cooler shut with a bang.

Callie blinked and retreated. “Maybe some other time.” She left his card by the cash register and headed for the back.

“Darrel ain’t gonna like this.” Millie cornered Callie in the hall. “Ain’t gonna like *him*.”

“I don’t care what Darrel likes.”

Millie grabbed Callie by the shoulders. “Your parents were Alpha. It’s all kinds of horrible that the accident took ‘em, but the pack can’t go on like this. You’ve gotta make it official with Darrel. Or somebody.”

“Darrel can lead the pack. I don’t care!” Callie jerked free and hurried to her office, fighting tears.

Of course, Millie followed. She always did. “The pack looks to you, child. Whether you like it or not, you’re Alpha now. Unless someone puts up a challenge.”

"I want to abdicate." Barb and Joe Johnson smiled at Callie from a photo on the bookshelf, so happy, so in love. Callie slammed it face down.

"Your parents put this pack together from scavengers, misfits, and coydogs that had their tails between their legs. They made us strong, gave us a home. They made us *family*. Don't you care about that any more?" Millie watched Callie with solemn brown eyes, equal amounts of chiding and concern in her smoke-roughened voice.

Callie allowed her curtain of light brown hair to fall forward, shielding her from the gaze of the one person who could still make her deal with pack politics. "I love you all, but I'm not cut out to be Alpha."

"Sometimes there's more important things than what you want, Callie-girl. With your parents dead and your brother gone, who else have we got?"

"Darrel?" Callie spat his name like a curse.

"The pack will look to Darrel, if *you* look to Darrel."

The cowbell clanked again, interrupting the silence that stretched between them.

With a sigh, Millie went back to the bar to tend to business.

For the next hour, Callie hid in her office, ostensibly prepping the next week's orders, but really sitting in her father's desk chair staring into space. The comforting aroma of his pipe tobacco still clung to the upholstery six months later. The blank spot on the bookshelf gnawed at her. Finally, Callie righted the picture and faced her parents.

"What am I supposed to do?" Callie whispered.

In the next frame, her older brother glared at her from beneath his graduation cap. Rick hated growing up in Ryan. Joe groomed him to be Alpha, but Rick split the night after his high school graduation and hadn't been heard from since. Callie didn't even know where send him word about their parents' funeral.

She sensed Luke's presence before she saw him in the doorway. Her skin prickled and burned as a familiar musky scent wafted toward her.

"Frowning is bad for your looks." He touched his forehead. "Wrinkles. Too many and the fellas stop sniffing around." He winked, and Callie's stomach flip-flopped.

Callie planted her hands on her slender hips. "Planning to lighten my mood?"

"My ride's outside. I'll take you home and let you invite me in for coffee."

"Tempting, but it's happy hour." Callie pushed past Luke and felt his gaze on her backside as he followed her down the hall. She put a little extra sway into her stride.

"Let someone else handle it."

Warm, scotch-scented breath caressed her face. Callie knew she should move, but she didn't. One of his long fingers traced a fiery line down her jaw.

"Callie!"

She jerked away from Luke as a short, stocky man with spiky red hair pushed through the curtain separating the hall from the bar. He looked from Callie to Luke, his nostrils flaring. "Who are you?"

"Darrel," Callie answered, her voice flat, "this is Luke."

Luke just smirked.

"What's he doing here? The back is family only." The pitch of Darrel's voice rose until the last word was practically a yip.

“Back off, Darrel,” Callie warned, but it was too late. The brash, young werecoyote forced his way between “his” girl and the interloper.

Luke’s voice was little more than a growl. “I don’t have a problem with you; let’s leave it that way.”

“If you didn’t want a problem,” Darrel snarled, “you shouldn’t have messed with her!” He threw a left hook that Luke sidestepped more easily than should have been possible. Darrel might be shorter, but he had the preternaturally fast reflexes of the beast within.

Her own beast twitched restlessly; Callie’s brown eyes flashed golden as her coyote urged her to attack Darrel and force him into submission. She took a few deep breaths, forcing her beast to quiet down, then grabbed Luke’s hand, taking pleasure in the anger on Darrel’s face.

“We’re leaving,” Callie told Darrel. “Deal with it.”

Luke chuckled and allowed Callie to pull him through the curtain and out the door.

He mounted a black Harley Sportster with gleaming chrome that waited in the handicapped parking space. She straddled the leather seat behind him. Gravel sprayed as he gunned the motor and raced for the highway. She hollered directions over the thundering engine, then leaned back to let the rush of the wind blow her frustrations away. For the first time in weeks, months even, she felt free in her human form. The only other feeling that came close was racing through the countryside in coyote form, hunting rabbits and howling at the moon.

Too soon, they pulled into her driveway. Her parents had owned two hundred acres in the hill country outside of Ryan. The rocky, cedar-covered land wasn’t much for ranching or farming, but it made the perfect hunting ground for a pack of werecoyotes. Callie had refurnished the tiny two-room cabin, creating her own private sanctuary. Luke killed the bike’s motor and silence covered them like a blanket. Overhead, sunset painted the sky with dramatic streaks of pink and orange.

“Nice.”

She heard the genuine approval in his tone as he surveyed the property.

“Thanks.”

A porch wrapped around the cabin. She sat on the swing and gestured for Luke to join her. When he did, his long legs reached all the way to the porch rail.

“Thanks for the rescue back there,” she said.

“Is Darrel your boyfriend?”

Her short bark of laughter interrupted the crickets’ song. “He wishes.”

“I’m glad he isn’t.” He slid closer.

Callie knew she should stop him. She barely knew Luke. No one would approve, not Millie, certainly not Darrel, and definitely not her parents. His lips touched hers, and passion exploded. She pressed against him, plunging her tongue deep into his mouth. One of his hands cupped the back of her head while the other tugged her blouse out of her jeans. His jacket fell to the ground, and the heat of his skin singed her through his blue t-shirt.

Most of Callie’s limited romantic experience had been with members of the pack, but she had gone out with non-pack boys a time or two during college. Comparatively,

non-pack boys were timid. The more aroused Callie got, the more her beast wanted to come out and play. If Callie wasn't going to Change, the beast demanded satisfaction in other ways. That kind of aggression in a woman scared the non-pack boys, but Luke met her urge for urge.

Finally, that realization broke through the haze of passion, and Callie pushed against his chest. Luke chuckled and tugged her closer. Callie shoved him back.

"Get off!"

This time he retreated to his side of the swing with a mutinous expression. "What?"

The coyote inside howled with disappointment, begging for action; her muscles trembled as she fought down the wild emotions. Callie spoke between ragged pants.

"Your kiss, it's not normal."

"Normal is boring." Luke grinned, and his teeth glinted in the moonlight. Were his canines longer than before?

"Tell me the truth!" Her fingers itched as fingernails threatened to explode into claws, and her heart pounded in her ears.

His grin faded. "You already know."

"You're were?"

"Werewolf."

Her hackles rose again, this time in response to an intruder in her territory. Werecoyotes and werewolves were usually rivals. "This is coyote country. Why are you here?"

"Rick sent me."

Her brother's name twisted like a knife in her chest. The pounding in her ears became a roar, and her insides shifted; fangs filled her mouth. The half moon peeked over the tree line. She didn't have to Change, but she could. Her beast begged for freedom, promising that a run through the woods would clear the confusion and pain from her mind.

Large hands rubbed her back in slow, soothing circles. With a force of will, Callie held onto her humanity. Fangs shrank back into teeth, and claws retracted. Luke seemed to sense that the urge had passed and returned to his side of the swing.

"Thanks," Callie whispered. "How do you know Rick?"

"He works at my club in New York. I was passing through Texas, so he asked me to deliver this." Luke handed her a square of paper that she unfolded with trembling fingers. The brief note was scrawled in her brother's handwriting and included a phone number.

I heard about Mom and Dad, and I'm sorry. But don't let their dreams rule your life, Cal. There's a place for you in New York. You can trust Luke. He's a good guy, for all that he's a wolf. I love you.

Her eyes blurred with tears.

Luke sat with his feet propped on the railing, but the intensity of his gaze belied his casual pose. "Will you come?"

She couldn't answer.

"If you do, I'd like to see more of you." He covered her hand with his, and electricity shot all the way down to her toes, searing away her melancholy. Her beast grabbed the moment with all four paws, and Callie jumped him, smashing her lips against his. The more she felt, the less she had to think. Luke's hands on her bare skin made thinking impossible.

They sprang apart when they heard tires crunching on the gravel driveway. By the time they were presentable enough to descend the front steps, a semicircle of cars and pickup trucks surrounded them. Darrel exited first, followed by Shane and Kyle. Her father had called them the Trio, and they'd gotten into endless scrapes during high school. Only Joe's firm hand, and sometimes his claws, kept them in line back then. All of the pack had come, except for two young mothers and the pups.

"What is this?" Callie asked.

"The pack decided," Darrel said, "we don't want you with *him*. If you're not going to get rid of him, we will."

Next to her, Luke tensed.

"You all feel this way?" Callie surveyed the familiar faces and found no support. Even Millie looked determined, though she didn't meet Callie's eyes. "What if I say no?"

"Boys!" Darrel called, and then the Trio Changed, throwing off their clothes seconds before their beasts took over. Legs shortened, arms lengthened, noses extended into snouts, and teeth sharpened into fangs. Foreheads sloped back, ears grew, and fur sprouted all over. Kyle and Shane were brown, but Darrel's fur shone with a burnished red. The other pack males started the Change as well, but the females watched, seemingly content to stay human. Though their pack was small, it was still fourteen male coyotes against one wolf. Formidable as Luke must be as a wolf, those were bad odds.

"Get on your bike and go," she hissed. "I'll keep them here."

"Somehow, I get the feeling you don't have as much power over them as you think." Luke shed his clothes and began his own Change.

He was here because of her; she couldn't let him face down her pack alone. Callie released her beast from its cage. The coyote burst forth before Callie had time to strip. Fabric shredded and seams ripped as Callie morphed into a fifty-pound coyote with golden eyes and light brown fur. A long scar marred her left flank. She'd gotten it as a pup, fighting the other pups into submission, and her beast wore it as a badge of honor.

The Trio finished Changing first, but the others weren't far behind. As a wolf, Luke stood much taller than the largest coyote, his dramatic gray and white coloring and light blue eyes looking like a glamour shot from the cover of *National Geographic*.

Darrel growled. Luke's ears went back and he snarled, baring his teeth. Callie yipped her own rebuke, placing herself between the red coyote and the wolf.

Kyle launched himself at Luke, snarling and biting. Luke twisted and bit down on Kyle's neck, tossing the lighter animal into a nearby cedar. The coyote's head hit the tree with an audible crack, and when he landed, he didn't get back up. Callie moved closer to see if Kyle was still breathing. She whined with relief at the shallow rise and fall of his chest.

With Callie out of the way, the remaining members of the Trio sprang on Luke in a flash of fur and fangs. The coyotes pulled the wolf down, the pair of them equaling the giant wolf's weight. Luke hit the ground and rolled, the three combatants tumbling over and over, leaving a trail of crimson and bits of fur along the driveway. Luke freed himself and then ran into the woods, Shane and Darrel on his heels. The rest of the pack males, except two, followed.

One of the remaining two, Richard, paced protectively next to Kyle; the other, Art, placed himself between her and the path. She snarled, but Art, a middle-aged coyote with grizzled fur and a ragged left ear, didn't back down.

The beast within Callie raged, furious at her authority being questioned. Darrel and the others might have been insolent, but they had not disobeyed a direct command. With a snap of her jaws, Callie flew at Art. He might be bigger, but she was faster. She rammed him with the full force of her fifty pounds and knocked him to the ground. They rolled several times as Art tried to break free. Callie clamped her teeth around one of his front legs and bit down with all her might. He jerked, but Callie dug her teeth in more deeply. He pulled again, harder this time, and her fangs tore through a tendon. With a yelp of pain, Art hunkered down; she smelled his fear and howled. He crouched low in submission, looking anywhere but in her eyes. Callie let him up and turned to Richard, who ducked his head, as well. Behind them, some of the women clapped.

A wolf's howl slithered along the wind, echoing in the distance. Callie plunged headlong into the underbrush tracking her rogue pack. She smelled the pack before she saw them and took care to stay downwind.

The pack stood in a loose semicircle, the wolf between them and the pond. Blood stained the white fur of Luke's belly and dripped down one foreleg. Darrel and Shane advanced on him. Callie knew which one she had to deal with, and she was ready.

Callie burst into the middle of the coyotes with a crash of underbrush. Darrel growled, but Callie didn't give him time for more than that. She went straight for his throat. Darrel reared back, so she sank her teeth into his flank instead. They rolled, and she dug in with teeth and claws. When he shook her off, his blood stained her muzzle and glistened on her claws brighter than "I'm not a waitress" nail polish.

Darrel's fangs ripped through her ear, and she reeled back in pain. Behind her, Luke growled a warning at Darrel. Shane snarled a counter-warning at Luke. Callie took advantage of Darrel's distraction and launched herself at him. She had to finish this before Luke got involved. If he helped, she wouldn't truly be Alpha, something she finally knew she wanted.

The pair of coyotes moved so fast that a non-were couldn't have tracked all the bites and gouges. The only sounds in the clearing were the snarls and yelps of the combatants. She kept him on the move, wearing the larger coyote down. Then Callie sank her teeth into his side. Darrel yipped and wriggled away, but Callie lunged against him. They fell to the ground, and this time when the rolling stopped, Callie stood over Darrel, her fangs at his throat.

After a long moment, Callie loosened her grip just enough for him to roll over. Darrel snapped at her, so Callie clamped down until she tasted blood. Her beast urged

her to tear out his jugular and spill his lifeblood on the dirt. But then Joe and Barb's faces flashed in her mind. They wouldn't want this. Darrel was family, too.

He whimpered. Callie forced down her bestial urges long enough to release the pressure just a bit, but she didn't move until Darrel rolled over and exposed his belly in submission. Callie forced him to maintain that position until she was sure the pack understood; then she let him up, nuzzling him briefly before allowing him to slink off into the middle of the pack—her pack. She howled, and the other coyotes echoed the call. Back at the cabin, they found Kyle, Richard, and Art human again. A sling made from a pillowcase supported Art's arm; Kyle seemed groggy, but alert.

Millie waved Callie and Luke into the cabin. "Y'all Change and we'll take care of the rest." Under Millie's direction, several of the older women tended Luke in the bedroom while Millie herded Callie into the bathroom. Soon Callie found herself back in human form, wrapped in her blue terrycloth robe, with Millie fussing over her wounds.

"You gonna go off with that wolf now?" the older woman asked.

Callie shook her head. "I'm staying right here."

"With him?"

"Alone." Callie pulled her hair to one side so Millie could swab antiseptic over her ear. The damage was not as dramatic once her flesh had knitted itself back into a human-shaped ear, but it would be a long time before she could comfortably wear earrings again. "You were right. I am Alpha, and I'm not hiding from it anymore."

A smile wrinkled Millie's face. "I'm glad, Callie-girl." They hugged, and for a moment, Callie felt like she was in her mother's arms. After seeing to Callie, Millie took the first aid kit outside and called for the other women to follow. Callie heard Millie barking orders, and the thought flickered through Callie's mind that Millie would make a better co-Alpha than any mate Callie might take from within the pack. At least for now. Her pack had always been untraditional.

The bed creaked as Luke stood. Both Ace and gauze bandages wrapped his muscular chest; he winced when he pulled his T-shirt over his head. "You aren't coming to New York," he said. It was a statement, not a question.

Callie tightened her robe. Modesty seemed odd since he'd seen all of her shapes, but there it was anyway. "I have to stay. This is my pack."

"I had a pack once." Luke slipped his arm around her shoulder. "Keep yours strong."

"I will." She leaned against him for a moment, noticing how perfectly she fit in his arms.

He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her. Heat pulsed between them, only slightly muted by mutual exhaustion, but Callie knew she couldn't have both Luke and her pack. Her decision was simple—the pack needed her. When Luke let go, she didn't protest.

Callie followed him outside. "Give Rick my love."

Luke straddled his bike and winked. The engine revved, and she watched his taillights until they disappeared. Millie waved at Callie from the window of her pickup. Art, Kyle, and Darrel all rode in the back. "Richard and me are takin' the boys to the doc. We'll call and let you know how they're doin'."

When she was finally alone, Callie turned off the lights and settled into the porch swing, letting her eyes adjust to the moonlight. She took a deep breath and relished the solitude.

The Texas wilderness grew quiet and sleepy, surrounding her with the familiar sounds and smells of her childhood—wildflowers, cedar, crickets chirping, mosquitoes buzzing. In the distance, Callie heard the staccato howl of a real coyote, and in her heart, she answered.