

Chapter 196

Rafe was a big man, the largest Were in a hundred miles. He stood almost six and a half feet tall with a wide, muscled chest and thick arms and legs. His long dark brown hair was wet and unkempt; he ran his fingers through it in an attempt to tame it in lieu of a comb. His eyes almost matched the colour of his hair and he had the rugged, handsome face of a movie star. He exuded power in every lithe movement, his position as Alpha of the Armand-Hanlon Pack undeniable.

The sound of an approaching vehicle caught his attention and he strode to the window. He tensed immediately at the sight of an unknown Jeep entering the main compound and strode quickly from the bedroom.

"Mallen, inside," he barked at the pack doctor who was just running up to the third floor which housed the Alpha's private quarters. "No one gets in that room under any circumstances."

The sandy haired Were was nodding instantly, slipping into the bedroom to guard his Alpha's mate.

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Rafe met two of his Betas on the way downstairs. "Protect Lacey," he ordered quietly, his steps never faltering as Sam and Harley flew past him silently on their way to the third floor.

He was at his front door by the time the Jeep stopped. The driver's door opened and a tall man exited the vehicle. Surprise hit him like a sledgehammer as he saw who was standing beside the vehicle.

He read cold hard fury in the other man's gaze as he quickly studied him. His long brown hair was unbound, the inch long streak of silver glinting in the warm summer sunshine. He knew who he was, and felt his fury through the fragile bond of Alpha and pack member.

Rafe had almost resigned himself to the fact that Dayton Alexander would eventually snap the fragile bond between them, that he would never come to accept it and would one day become truly alone, a Were with no pack, with no Alpha to guide him when he needed it. He had respected the other man's need to be alone, figuring he would come to him if he ever felt the need. It would appear that he now did.

He sensed Aaron come up beside him, heard the sharp intake of breath from his number two and best friend. He could only imagine what must be going through his friend's mind right now as he looked on his brother for the first time in more than fifty years.

Another startled gasp reached his ears and he turned his head to see Cedar standing frozen in the middle of the compound. There was no sign of Alexei; he must have stayed with the children while the pack investigated the newcomers.

"Dayton?" she whispered, her eyes suddenly filling with tears as she stared at the brother she'd assumed she would never see again. Loretta had told her that they had talked briefly; that her brother was still hurting badly and there was no sign of him coming back to the pack. Seeing him there in front of her was more than she could stand. She took a step forward.

"I need to speak with you, Alpha," Dayton finally said, his words cold and hard, stopping Cedar in her tracks.

She choked down a cry of disappointment, desperate to go to him but knowing he wasn't ready for that. His body language screamed to keep away, his voice a whip crack across her skin. Dayton was here but he didn't want to be. He might never want to truly be pack again.

"Aaron, take Cedar inside before her distress causes Alexei to react," Rafe said quietly, his eyes remaining fixed on the man before him. "You know what he gets like when he thinks someone is deliberately hurting her." He chose his words carefully to soothe the pain he could feel in his friend too.

Stepping down from the porch he walked towards the Jeep. He glanced at the cat sitting quietly in the passenger seat, making no move to get out. "Can she be trusted?" he asked as he glanced at the stunning woman who appeared to be no threat. "My mate is due to give birth soon. My wolf is a bit irrational at the moment."

Dayton nodded, understanding what the Alpha was telling him. If Rayne proved a threat in any way he would kill her to protect his children and the pack young. It was a warning and a promise all rolled into one. The pack would be protected at all costs.

"I wouldn't have brought her if she couldn't be trusted," he answered firmly. "Rayne will harm no one, Alpha."

Rafe considered for a long moment, searching the other man's face intently and then he finally relaxed. The moment he did so the rest of the waiting Pack did too. "Come," he ordered, turning and heading back to his home.

He heard the Jeep door open and inhaled deeply to scent the wildcat. He stiffened and turned his head slightly to look back at the woman. She met his gaze unflinchingly, waiting to see how he would react at being unable to scent her. After a brief pause he turned away and continued into the house.

They followed him inside into a huge library-come-study off to the right. It was full of plush leather sofas and chairs, a large desk sitting in the far corner facing out to the room. It was obvious that this was a comfortable meeting room for a large number of people.

Rafe didn't sit behind the desk; instead he chose his favourite armchair beside the open fireplace. He watched as his two visitors chose to sit together on the sofa closest to him. Watching them intently he wondered if they were sleeping together. He could sense that they possessed a close bond, which was quite astounding given the way Dayton Alexander shunned all closeness with anyone. But then he realised that he couldn't sense any sexual tension between them; friendship appeared to be what brought them together.

"For the sake of your friend I'll introduce myself," he finally said when the silence stretched on and nobody spoke. He looked at the woman and gave her a brief smile. "I'm Rafe Hanlon, Alpha of the Armand-Hanlon Pack."

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He quirked an enquiring eyebrow at her and her lips curled slightly, a hint of amusement dancing across her pretty face.

"Just Rayne," she said softly. "You already know I'm not a wolf. I'm a black panther."

He nodded and turned to look at Dayton who was watching their interaction with interest. Their eyes met and a long moment passed between them before Rafe sighed softly.(w)(w).nÓtre(i)(w)Or@.coM

"I'm surprised to see you here, Dayton," he remarked. He was pleased the wolf had come to him but he was curious to know why. "Loretta didn't think you were anywhere close to returning to the pack when she met you."

"I wasn't," Dayton answered carefully. "I don't know if I will ever be truly ready to return to the pack." He didn't see any point in lying to his Alpha. He was here only because he had been left with no choice in the matter.

Rafe sighed again and tapped his fingers against his lips as he digested the other man's words. He was grateful for his honesty but his presence would pose issues he didn't want to have to deal with at the moment. Not with Lacey being so close to giving birth.

"That is problematic," he finally admitted. "Cedar's mate does not react well to any hurt caused to her. You're lucky he was detained with the children just now or I would have had to restrain him from ripping your throat out. Your presence here is going to cause ructions within the pack if you're unable to integrate with your family."

A dark scowl crossed Dayton's face and he felt a stab of guilt run through him. He had known his cold reaction would hurt his sister. He knew it had hurt Aaron too though his brother was better able at hiding it. He didn't want to hurt them but it was hard to throw off fifty years of solitude to let them back in. He knew he now wanted to but he didn't know how to.

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"It's not my intention to hurt Cedar or Aaron," he ground out, some of his cold fury igniting into something a bit darker.