

PREFACE

The flame's shadows dance across my face as I watch our fallen burn in the fire we lit. Ashes of their remains float up into the cold winter wind, never to be seen again. My feet in the snow no longer feel cold, nor does the evening air.

Memories of the love that withstood the test of time and that brought me here grace me as the flame's shadows dance across my face.

CHAPTER ONE

Imaginations and Reality

My mother—happily cooking in her humble kitchen—was unaware of how far her young, adventurous child would wander off, playing outside, daring the world to shock her. I didn't realize it then, but that was exactly what the world would do: show me a reality that shouldn't exist but does, and did for a while in the woods behind my childhood home.

The warm sun shone down on me as I, once again, triumphantly journeyed through the forest. My worn trail to my make-believe castle was where I first met the two magnificent wolves who would soon deliver my destiny. Even though I was only six, their beauty awed. Instead of being afraid, I believed my imagination had given me another gift.

Woods were not frightening for me. In the daylight, they were a magical place for me to investigate, experiment, be daring, and make believe. Of course, nighttime was a whole different period of mystery, which I willingly left to the adults. My imagination was so profound reality often didn't exist for me. I invented a world to live out the boundless possibilities my overactive mind developed.

To my younger self, the smaller wolf seemed gentle, motherly, with her golden-brown fur and her kind, brown eyes. The massive wolf beside her appeared stern and far too serious with his jet-black fur and haunting gray eyes.

“Hi,” I excitedly greeted them. “My name is Marlana.”

The black wolf did not seem to share my excitement. His body lowered as if ready to pounce. The brown wolf ignored him and gaped at me, as if surprised to see me wandering the expansive forest by myself.

“Would you like to see my castle?” I innocently asked.

The black wolf took two steps away from my path. The gentle wolf whimpered, not following. He turned his large snout back to her and blew air out before coming back to her side.

I observed his aggravated nose puff. “Do you need a tissue? I don’t have any, but you could use my sleeve if you want to. I won’t tell my mommy.”

Dark gray eyes regarded me, possibly in disbelief.

I shrugged at his loss. “Then let’s go see my castle.”

I was tickled pink to look back and see the two weary wolves following me, one more enthusiastically than the other. As we traveled, I informed them of crucial details. “It’s no ordinary castle made of chocolate. No, those melt in the sun. Mine is special because it is under the protective spell of the witch, Coco-Matilda.” I looked back at them and grinned. “Coco-Matilda loves chocolate, too.”

At the end of the trail was my kingdom. “We’re here!”

Two majestic wolves stood and stared at the unadorned boulders and tree limbs I considered the best playground ever.

“I know! Pretty amazing, right?” I hopped onto my castle and immediately pointed out all the rooms. “This is the kitchen where food almost as good as my mommy’s and is made by elves. Here is my bedroom. It’s the best because I’m queen.” I froze as I had an epiphany. I pointed to my new friends. “I know who you are. My new guards! Castle guards!”

After another blow out the snout, I advised the male wolf, “You should see a doctor.”

I was blissfully unaware that perhaps I should be playing with other boys and girls, but we didn’t live in town, so we had no close neighbors. And stay-at-home parents were too busy minding their land and belongings to set up play dates. In this rural area, children without siblings or family near by learned to entertain themselves.

I didn’t mind being on my own, and my new companions didn’t seem to like company anyway. They were excellent at their job. The Chocolate Castle Guards always looked around, suspicious of any movement or sounds. I fed my guards wonderful food—sticks, leaves, and pebbles—cooked by the elves as reward for their work well done. I received a snout blow from one wolf and a gentle lick from the other.

After hours of playing, the black wolf took single guard duty as the brown wolf rested in the sun. Becoming a little sleepy myself, I sat down and decided the kind wolf would make a great pillow. Laying my head on her belly, I said, “Wow, you ate too much breakfast. Your tummy is huge!”

Another blow exited the black wolf’s nose.

And so time went by. Every day, I met with my wolves, who waited patiently—well, one waited patiently as the other paced—for me on the path to my castle. Then one day, they weren’t there. As queen, I had many duties, such as firing the Chocolate Castle Guards for missing work.

A few weeks later, they finally returned with a precious little gray wolf tagging along. All was forgiven, and I rejoiced in my imagination's new addition. "You had a baby!"

I ran toward them but stopped when I saw the puppy hide behind his mother's hind legs. I knelt down and sat on my feet. "Aw, did I scare you? I'm sorry, little fella. I promise I won't hurt you."

The black wolf seemed extra alert, circling with his snout sniffing the air and his ears perked high. The mother wolf stepped behind her pup and nudged him toward me. I waited patiently for the proper introduction. Her tongue swiping my cheek seemed to be what the puppy needed to witness.

The puppy sniffed my knees as I held still for him.

"May I pet you, little fella?" My hand slowly reached and paused for more sniffing inspections. When he began sniffing the other hand resting on my knee, I slowly touched the top of his head. He froze... then pushed his head into my palm, seeming to enjoy the sensation. "Oh, that feels good, huh?"

My resting hand joined and scruffed under his chin. A tail wagged rapidly, and he practically crawled up my body to lick my cheeks as I petted him freely with praise. "What a good boy! I think you like some lovin'. Don't cha, little fella?"

When I had the chance to study his adorable face, I saw the most unique gray eyes in the whole world. They were much lighter than his father's, and they had rather creative white speckles through them, resembling clouds in the sky. Those eyes became a part of my soul that day.

The little wolf with wonderful eyes became my best friend within minutes. We skipped—well, *I* skipped as he chased. We played tag and fetch for hours. His parents, who were now

affectionately and appropriately named Mother Wolf and Father Wolf, followed us closely. As always, one seemed at ease, the other far too tense.

When their baby wolf became tired, we were both nudged. “Where are we going?” I asked, until we ended up in an open cave. “Ohhhhh, wow!” There were leaves and debris on the stone ground that I imagined to be the underground world singing snakes called home. Moss growing up the walls was the rope I needed to escape the musical snakes when they were hungry.

I adored the puppy breath blowing across my face as we lay together on the dirty cave floor. Once still, the puppy fell asleep, and his heavy breathing lulled me to the point where I drifted off myself. Mother and Father Wolf sat at the opening of the cave, studying the surroundings.

Since Mother and Father Wolf could not speak, I understood when they could not tell me their new baby’s name. Since there was no obstacle I could not overcome, I gave him a name instead of pouting over the language barrier. And because my furry friend roamed with me every day, all through the forest...

“I know what I’ll name you,” I said with much enthusiasm. “Romy.”

It was a proud day.

Father Wolf, who on all fours, stood as tall as I was, snorted with his never-ending cold.

Mother Wolf proudly licked me; I knew she was pleased.



Romy grew at a drastic rate and, on all fours, was as tall as my hip in what felt like a few weeks. At the end of every play day, I dreaded leaving my best friend to go home and be forced into a tub to wash off the “grime,” as my mother so delicately put it.

Mother and Father Wolf watched over Romy and me as we both handled the extremely serious Chocolate Castle business that needed attention, such as floods in the castle kitchen and fairies needing guidance to resolve arguments. Of course, I did all the talking, which bothered me not one bit, since talking was a favorite activity of mine. My *only* problem with my talking was how it would trigger Father Wolf's nose issues.

Romy never found the castle dilemmas boring or repetitive as we gloriously saved the day every day. No, he found castle business as urgent and important as I did. One day, when his father growled and took off deeper into the woods, leaving Mother Wolf behind, Romy and I were sure he also had to go and save the day.

Some days that need saving aren't supposed to be saved, no matter how desperately we want it.

When Father Wolf failed to return, Mother Wolf tucked Romy and me away in our napping cave. Normally, Romy and I pretended that the old cave was my castle's secret, underground tunnel that we needed once a day for nap time when Romy and I were invaded by Martians, who *unfortunately*, would catch up to us *every day* and force us to sleep with their green Martian potions. But on this day, Romy wasn't willing to play Martian takeover and was only paying attention to his mother. His alert gray eyes watched her pace the cave's entrance while we sat together.

My human intuition was the last to realize something was drastically wrong. I found myself turning to Romy for comfort. I looked up to the wolf that now sat taller than I did and clung to him as the veil of my imagination began to deteriorate. My magical, make-believe world dissipated in front of my eyes, and the underground tunnel—where I used to run to save our lives—was truly a cold cave. It was at that very moment, when reality showed itself, that Romy

became the most important entity in my life. Something deep in my heart made me realize that he most likely would always be. And with that sense of change, Romy was no longer a part of my imagination. How *real* he truly was became evident, as did the seriousness of our situation.

Mother Wolf released a long exhale through her nose then came to stand in front of Romy and stared at him. They communicated as I had witnessed many times but had not really studied till now—now that my imagination could no longer fool me into thinking my wolf was pretend.

His head bobbed as his answer to his mother, and then he leaned toward me. Whatever he was telling his mother was what she must have wanted to hear because she nuzzled her face to his, licked me, and ran out of the cave. To where? I didn't know. Romy stayed by my side, not leaving me once, even when the sun began to set. I felt as if it was falling from the sky. Father and Mother Wolf had yet to return, and for the first time, Romy and I were left in the dark, alone.

Cozied up to his gray fur because the temperature was falling, I quietly said, "Romy? My mommy says I have to be home by dark."

Sad little clouded eyes looked at me. I was sure if Romy were human he would cry.

Leaving my best friend alone felt so wrong to my innocent, young mind.

So I didn't.

I chose to stay and deal with the spanking that was surely to come for my disobedience. I put my arms around my wolf. "Okay, Romy. I'll stay with you."

We sat together, side by side, heart by heart, watching the sun . . . disappear.



I don't know if it took minutes or hours for Mother Wolf to return, but our thudding hearts didn't get the reprieve we hoped for, not when watching Mother Wolf half crawl and half drag her wounded body to the cave's entrance. Romy and I were both up to our feet and paws, running to severely injured Mother Wolf.

I can still hear his whimpering to this day.

And I still feel the utter shock when I helplessly watched her collapse to the ground and turn into . . . a human.

CHAPTER TWO

Howling in the Distance

Being ripped from a fantasy world and thrown into a true nightmare with mystical boundaries would have confused and possibly tormented any human above a certain age. Me? It just seemed to confirm that the world was *truly* the magical place I believed it to be.

Mother Wolf's brown eyes opened, and she weakly called, "Sebastian." Her voice was warm and tender, even in such a state.

I didn't know whose name that was, but Romy kept crying out, a little apprehensive with his mother's new form. Slowly, he approached and sniffed her. Then he tenderly nudged her with his snout, as if recognizing her scent. Mother Wolf's eyes closed, and she tried to smile as her son licked her cheek, but she stopped and curled into a fetal position, grunting in pain.

I knelt in front of her.

Shakily, Mother Wolf reached for her son again. "Sebastian... I'm so sorry... your father—"

I was desperate to know what had happened, but she stopped talking to cough up blood. Even as young as I was, I knew what that meant.

"Y-your father... has passed."

Romy might have been a wolf, but he became more frantic with every word she spoke.

"I too . . . must pass . . ."

Romy's heart-wrenching whimpers forced tears down my cheeks. I cried for my friend, who could not form such things as tears.

Mother Wolf's face paled rapidly. "B-be strong my son. I'm so sorry to leave you... so soon. You have more to come... in your bright future." She looked at me for the very first time

with her *human* eyes. “Dear Marlana, you are... so special. When my son was born, I knew you could... teach him... a language I had... to hide from. I know you can do what... I ask of you. Please—” Coughing up more blood interrupted her, and I was afraid she would not get the chance to finish. “Please look after my son—your Romy. Keep his secret close to your heart always. H-he has much to learn and needs you.”

I nodded as I cried. “I will. I love him.”

A gracious smile passed her lips, shining past the smears of dirt and blood. “I know you do. He can’t tell you yet... but he loves you, too.”

“Yet?” I sniffled while wiping my nose on the back of my hand because my mother wasn’t there to give me a tissue.

“Yes, Sebastian will come to his change... and might be scared. You don’t need to be scared though... and remember, he will never hurt you. Remind him of these simple words when... his time comes...” She proceeded to give me information that made no sense to my young mind, but I promised to remember every word. I tried so hard.

Times come in your life that you wish you could avoid, run from, but you can’t. They come, and you have to bear and live through them.

As her breathing became more and more labored, Romy became more and more panicked, pacing, nudging, whimpering. When her hand reached for his paw, he froze and watched her. The blood pooling on the cave floor told us her last moment had come.

“There are ones who belong to you... but you are not of... age or size to enter the pack. Please don’t search for them... Stay with your Marle—” She didn’t have the strength to finish my name.

Romy stood by his mother’s side as her eyes closed.

I numbly sat on the ground at the cave entrance and watched as the moon shone down on Romy, caressing his loneliness as if trying to blanket him from such devastating pain. Romy rolled his shoulders back as he faced the sky and then painfully howled into the night.



As young ones do, Romy and I soon gave into our exhaustion and fell asleep, clutching each other the only way wolf and child can. His soft winter coat gave me all the heat I needed for my human body to survive the chill.

I didn't wake to the man rummaging around in the woods with a flashlight, not even as he approached the cave. I woke to a growl I'd never heard before that sad night.

My eyes opened to see Romy standing protectively over my body.

With a flashlight shining in my eyes, I could not see who was frozen in fear, but I soon knew who it was when I heard, "No! Don't hurt my daughter."

I tried to get to my feet but was challenged with a wolf over me. "Daddy?"

Instantly, Romy stopped growling and lowered his head, letting me up.

"Marlena, please don't move. The wolf will hurt you."

With my hand on my wolf, I said, "Romy? He would *never* hurt me."

My father's jaw dropped. "This *wolf* is your *imaginary* friend Romy, the Roamer?"

I nodded proudly, smiling. "Look! He's real!"

His hand shook as he gestured to me. "I see that. Come to Daddy, little girl."

I ran and jumped into my father's arms, noticing he was not as warm as Romy, but loving his embrace never the less. My father hugged me tightly as he sighed.

"Daddy, Romy's daddy is dead like his mommy. He needs to live with us now."

"Little girl, he's not a dog. H-he's a wolf—"

My father struggled to hold me, but I squirmed out of his arms and ran to Romy. I stood in front of my wolf with a scowl on my cold face. Pointing a tiny finger to my father, I scolded him. “Romy is my best friend, and that was his mother.” When I looked at her, I was shocked to see Mother Wolf in wolf form again. But then I remembered she was probably trying to protect Romy’s secret, as she had asked me to do. “A-and he is now all alone. He needs me!”

I suppose my father would have agreed to anything to have me back in his arms. “Okay, little girl. Just come back to me.” His blue eyes watched me, anxiously waiting.

Back in his arms, I learned my father had no intention of taking a wild animal home with us, and there was nothing I could say to convince him otherwise.

Being forcefully carried away, I cried, screamed, and sobbed for my friend. Back at the cave, Romy howled. He had just lost everything, including me.

At home, my mother tried to sooth her hysterical child in the bathtub. Soon, she gave up and tried putting me to bed. It was so late, and I was so tired that my body surrendered. Only my pink lamp on my night stand was lit. My white floral quilt was tucked over my lightly trembling body. I continued to cry quietly as my mother caressed my head.

Romy still howled in the distance.

“Everett, is he getting closer?” my mother, laying in bed with me, whispered to my father.

He looked out my second-floor bedroom window to our backyard. “Yeah, sure sounds like it.”

That was when I remembered his sense of smell. My Romy was going to find his way to me.

When my parents went to sleep in their bedroom because I'd smartened up and faked falling to sleep, I grabbed my blanket and pillow and snuck down the stairs, headed for the back porch of our simple log cabin. I had the only bedroom upstairs. My parents slept downstairs in the front of the house.

At the bottom of the stairs, I checked for the scary creatures of the night, but all I saw was a dark living room to my left. Only a light glow remained in the fireplace. To my right was our small kitchen, where I could usually find my mother, and our cozy eating area. Ten feet in front of me was my destination—the back door.

It was a humble home but enough for a hard-working man and a stay-at-home mom to live very happily. My father was proud and loved his little family with all his heart.

I adjusted my blanket and pillow to prepare for my sprint and took off running, my bare feet pitter-patting on the old wooden floors. At the back door, I hesitated, well, it was dark and scary, but when I tippy-toed and looked through the door's window, I saw my furry friend sniffing the back porch steps. I hesitated no longer. I snuck outside quietly to a sad wolf that seemed to want to be by my side, but apparently wasn't trusting the unknown objects I called stairs. I had to coax him to me while he sniffed each step, the blue flower pot, and the bristly mat as though everything was foreign to him.

I guessed it was.

Soon, he calmed, and we hunkered down for the night. With my back to the outer wall of my house, I lay down on my side. Romy curled in front of me with his head on my pillow we shared, and I snuggled to his furry back after covering us both with my blanket.

After finding Romy and me on the porch sleeping together three mornings in a row, my parents felt they had no choice. Romy was officially welcomed to the family and became our... dog—well, *wolf*.

My mother was as reluctant to allow an animal inside the home as the animal was to come *into* the home. He sniffed and kept his tail down, debating on whether or not it was safe. I looked around and realized Romy had never seen a house before. He knew nothing that belonged to humans other than what he saw with me, which was, well, just *me*.

I knelt down in front of the stairs that led to my bedroom, being patient during Romy's examination of the open back doorway. Gray eyes stared at me as he stayed on the porch and sniffed and sniffed. I smiled and waited and waited.

Romy stopped sniffing, looked at me again, and paused. Time seemed to slow as we stared at each other. Something Romy saw made him cross the barrier and enter my home—now our home—and lick my face.



My mom protested that evening, but I won, and Romy got to sleep in bed with me. He hated the blanket, but I was stubborn, and he waited until I fell asleep to crawl out from underneath the heated cover.

People should follow children's examples and live without worry, love and appreciate everything around them and most of all, accept what has transpired, and move forward. Romy was the prime example of such courage.

The next morning, it was still dark when I woke with no Romy in my bed. Sitting up, I saw a sad wolf sitting by my window, staring into the woods. I wondered what he hoped to see. I

thought of his mother and knew how sad I would be to not be able to see my mommy anymore. Remembering my Uncle Trey passing away a few months before, I knew what we had to do.

With a blanket and a shovel that was bigger than I was dragging behind us, my wolf and I went deep into the woods to bury his mother.

Romy ran to her and sniffed the wolf body that no longer carried a soul. I tried not to pay attention to the evidence of how nature works, the marks of smaller animals finding a meal. She was very heavy, but I managed to get the blanket under her. I grabbed one corner, Romy bit the other, and we both pulled as hard as we could, dragging his mother to where the earth was softer so we could lay her to rest.

While I used the monstrous shovel as best I could, Romy lay with Mother Wolf. I believe he wanted every last moment he could have with her, alive or dead. As the morning sun rose, the glow made Mother Wolf look as if she was peacefully sleeping, half covered in a blanket. It was a kind way for a son to see his mother for the last time.

Being so young and small, I could only dig a shallow grave. Once done, Romy and I pulled on the blanket and laid his mother to rest. The little mound of dirt covering her was all there was left to see—but not to feel. Romy sat next to the mound, not ready to leave her, so I sat next to my wolf and waited for him to find some peace. I don't know how long we sat side by side, leaning on each other, and it didn't matter. I would've stayed next to him forever.