BLOODROSE

A NIGHTSHADE Novel
ANDREA CREAMER

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Bloodrose: a Nightshade novel

Calla Tor, the alpha member of her shapeshifting wolf pack, must decide if her illicit love for the human Shay is worth the ultimate sacrifice.

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For my parents
I am about to take my last voyage, a great leap in the dark.

—Thomas Hobbes
I COULD HEAR each heavy beat of my heart. The sound seemed to ebb from my veins out of my body, traveling across the empty space between the shimmering portal and the dark house.

He was there. I had no doubt. Though I couldn’t see him or even catch the slightest hint of his warm, smoky scent, I knew he was there. Waiting for me. But why? Why would Ren come to this lonely place?

My gaze traveled over the shadows that twisted as clouds slid over the moon, reminding me too much of wraiths. I stared at the sky so I didn’t have to look at the houses, or the skeletal frames of those left unfinished. Time had been frozen here. The mountain slope, cleared of trees to make way for a cul-de-sac and ring of houses, whispered of a past unreachable. The sprawling Haldis Compound— or what would have become the Haldis Compound—lay before me, composed of luxury homes built exclusively for the pack Ren and I would have led together. Our pack’s den. Our home.

I turned to face Adne, trying to hide my shivering. “Stay out of sight. You’ll hear me if there’s a problem, and if I come running, you’d better open a door fast. No matter what, don’t come looking for me.”

“Deal,” she said, already backing toward the forest. “Thank you, Calla.”

I nodded before I shifted into wolf form. Adne melted into
shadows. When I was satisfied that no one would be able to detect her, I began to stalk toward the house. Its windows were dark, the structure silent. For all appearances it looked empty, but I knew it wasn’t.

I kept my muzzle low, testing the air. We’d arrived upwind from the compound, which left me feeling vulnerable. I wouldn’t be able to pick up the scent of anyone hidden by night’s veil until I was almost on top of them. My ears flicked back and forth, alert, listening for any sign of life. There was nothing. No rabbits dashing for cover under brush, nor did nocturnal birds flit through the sky. This place wasn’t just abandoned; it felt cursed, as if nothing dared tread within the boundaries of the clearing.

I picked up my pace, covering the distance to the house, leaping over snowdrifts, my nails scraping on rivers of ice that had frozen on the pavement. When I reached the front steps, I stopped to sniff the ground. My eyes followed fresh paw prints that became boot tracks, climbing the steps. Ren’s scent was sharp, new. He’d arrived only slightly before we had. I slowly moved up to the porch, shifting forms to open the screen door. I carefully turned the doorknob. The house wasn’t locked. I let the door swing open. It made a slight creak but nothing else. I slipped inside, closing the door and turning the dead bolt. If someone did come after me, I wanted warning of their arrival.

I shifted back into wolf form, moving through the front hall, tracing Ren’s scent to the main staircase. I tried not to cringe as I passed the entrance to the dining room. A beautiful oak table, probably antique, was surrounded by chairs. Four on each side, one at the head and one at the foot. Ten. It was too easy to imagine meals there. Our pack together, laughing, teasing, belonging.

I climbed the stairs slowly, wishing my nails weren’t clicking on the hardwood. When I reached the second floor, I paused, listening. The house only answered with silence. Still trailing Ren’s path
through the house, I passed three bedrooms and a bathroom, until I reached the door at the end of the hallway. My heart slammed against my rib cage as I entered the master suite.

Only a few steps in, I stopped. Wisps of moonlight curled through the room, illuminating the stately bed, piled with satin pillows, draped in jacquard linens, boasting tall ebony posts at each corner. Matching armoires sat against one wall. On the adjoining wall, a mirrored vanity and settee faced the bed.

Ren’s scent was everywhere. The smoke of aged wood lingering beneath a chilled autumn sky, the smooth burn of well-worn leather, the seductive ribbon of sandalwood. I closed my eyes, letting his scent pour over me, filling me with memories. It was a moment before I could shake my ruff, sending the past scurrying as I tried to focus on the present.

The light from outside filtered in through tall bay windows with a seat nestled beneath them. Curled beneath the windows, partly cloaked by shadow, was Ren. He was lying very still, head resting on his paws. And he was staring at me.

We stayed like that, frozen, watching each other, for what felt like an eternity. Finally I forced myself to take a step forward. His head snapped up, hackles rising. I heard his low, threatening growl. I paused, fighting off my instinct to snarl at him.

He stood up, still growling, and began to pace back and forth below the window. I took another step forward. His fangs flashed as he barked a warning. I dipped my head, not wanting to give any sign of aggression. It didn’t matter.

Ren’s muscles bunched and he lunged at me, knocking me onto my side. I yelped as we slid across the wood floor. His jaws snapped just above my shoulder as I rolled away. I scrambled to my feet, dodging when he lunged again. I felt the heat of his breath and his fangs brushing against my flank. I whirled, snarling, and faced him, bracing myself for his next attack. When he struck for the third time, but
his teeth didn’t cut my flesh, I realized what was happening. Ren
didn’t want to attack me. He was only trying to scare me off.

Squaring my shoulders, I barked at him. \textit{Stop!}

I met his dark eyes, which were on fire.

\textit{Why won’t you fight me?} He bared his teeth.

I tracked him, turning in a slow circle as he stalked around me. \textit{I
didn’t come here to fight.}

This time when he lunged, I didn’t move. His muzzle was inches
from mine, and he snarled, but I didn’t flinch.

\textit{You shouldn’t be here if you aren’t ready to fight.}

\textit{I’m always ready to fight.} I showed him my own teeth. \textit{But that
doesn’t mean I want to.}

His rumbling growl slowly faded. He lowered his head, turning
away from me and walking back to the window, where he stared up
at the sky.

\textit{You shouldn’t be here.}

\textit{I know.} I padded toward him. \textit{Neither should you.}

When he turned to face me, I shifted into human form.

The charcoal wolf blinked and then Ren was standing in front of
me, gazing down at my face.

\textit{Why are you here?}

\textit{I could ask you the same thing,} I said, biting my lip. The fact
that he whiled away the hours in an empty house built for us was not
the reason I’d come here. But it was hard to push those thoughts
away. Standing in this room, on this mountain, in this house, every-
thing felt like it was about us. I could barely remember the outside
world. The Searchers. The war.

His eyes flashed, but then went hollow.

\textit{It’s a good place to be alone.}”

\textit{I’m sorry,”} I said. The words felt like ice in my throat.

\textit{For what, exactly?”} His smile was razor sharp, and I cringed.

\textit{Everything.”} I couldn’t look at him, so I walked through the
room, staring at nothing in particular, moving past furniture with empty drawers. A bed no one would sleep in.

“Everything,” he repeated.

I was across the room, standing on the other side of the bed, when I turned around, staring at him.

“Ren, I came to help you. It doesn’t have to be like this.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“You don’t have to stay here.”

“Why would I leave?” he said. “This is my home.” His fingers grazed the satin surface of the bed linens. “Our home.”

“No, it’s not.” I gripped one of the bedposts. “We didn’t choose this; it was chosen for us.”

“You didn’t choose this.” He walked to the other side of the bed.

“I thought we would have had a good life here.”

“Maybe.” My nails dug into the wood varnish. “But it wasn’t really a choice. Even if it might have been good.”

“You never wanted it. Did you?” His fists were clenched at his sides.

“I don’t know,” I said. My heart was beating too fast. “I never asked myself what I wanted.”

“Then why did you run?”

“You know why,” I said softly.

“For him,” he snarled, grabbing a pillow and hurling it across the room. I stepped back, forcing my voice to remain calm.

“It’s not that simple,” I said. The moment he mentioned Shay, something inside me stirred. I still felt sad, but stronger. Shay hadn’t just changed the path of my life. He’d changed me. No, not changed. He’d helped me fight for my true self. Now it was my turn to help Ren do the same.

“Isn’t it?” He glared at me.

“Would you have been able to kill him?” I asked, holding Ren’s gaze. “Is that how you wanted to start a life with me?”
Part of me didn’t want to know the answer. Could he really want Shay dead? If I was wrong about Ren, coming here was a terrible mistake. We would fight and I would have to kill him. Or he would kill me.

He bared sharp canines at me, but then he sighed. “Of course not.”

I slowly moved around the bed. “That’s the only life they would have offered us. Killing the people who need to be helped.”

He watched me approach, remaining stone still.

“The Keepers are the enemy, Ren,” I said. “We’ve been fighting on the wrong side of this war.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I know the Searchers now,” I said. “I trust them. They helped me rescue our pack.”

His smile was harsh. “Some of it.”

“The others made their choice.”

“And I didn’t?” His eyes were obsidian dark, angry. But I didn’t think his rage was directed at me.

When I closed my eyes briefly, unable to take in the torrent of regret that flooded Ren’s stare, I was back in Vail, in a cell deep beneath Eden. I remembered the desperation in Ren’s voice, the fear in my own.

“They said I have to.”

“Have to what?”

“Break you.”

I shuddered as the memory of slamming into the wall and tasting blood in my mouth rushed over me. Forcing myself back into the room, I caught Ren’s slightly sick expression and I knew his mind had been in the same place.

I swallowed, clasping my hands so they wouldn’t shake. “I hope you didn’t.”

He didn’t answer, but gazed at me.
“I don’t believe you wanted to hurt me,” I said. “And I don’t think you would have, even if Monroe hadn’t—”

My words dried up in my throat. It was true, but that didn’t take away the memory. The horror of those moments had been etched on my bones.

“I wouldn’t have,” Ren whispered.

I nodded, though I wasn’t sure I believed it. What mattered now was getting him out of here and away from the world that twisted him into someone who could hurt me. He started to lift his hand, as if to touch my cheek, but then let it drop back to his side.

“Did the Searchers send you to find me?”

“Sort of.”

His brow shot up.

“Monroe wanted to find you,” I said.

Ren’s jaw tightened. “The man my—The man Emile killed.”

I noticed the way he’d stopped himself. He didn’t want to call Emile his father.

“Ren.” I reached out, taking his hand. “Do you know?”

His fingers gripped mine. “Is it true? Did Emile kill my mother?”

I nodded, feeling tears slip from my eyes.

He pulled his hand away, fisting his fingers in his dark hair, pressing his temples. His shoulders began to shake.

“I’m so sorry.”

“That man.” Ren’s voice cracked. “That man, Monroe. He’s my real father, isn’t he?”

I watched him, wondering how he’d put it all together. “How did you know?”

Not much time had passed between the fight in Eden’s depths and this strained moment where I stood looking at Ren. I’d known him since we were both pups, but I felt like in the last twenty-four hours, we’d aged decades.

Emile began to laugh. Ren still crouched between his father and
the Searcher, his charcoal eyes blazing as he watched Monroe lower his swords.

“I won’t hurt the boy,” Monroe said. “You know that.”

“I guessed it,” Emile said, eyes flicking to the snarling young wolves. “Make sure he doesn’t escape. It’s time for Ren to avenge his mother.”

“Ren, don’t! He’s lying. It’s all lies!” I shrieked. “Come with us!”

“She’s not one of us any longer,” Emile hissed. “Think of how she’s treated you, how she turned her back on all of us. Taste the air, boy. She stinks of the Searchers. She’s a traitor and a whore.”

He glared at me and I stumbled back at the livid fire in his eyes. “Don’t worry, pretty girl. Your day is coming. Sooner than you think.”

I jerked sideways when Connor grabbed my arm and tugged hard. He pulled me toward the unguarded door.

“We can’t leave him!” I shouted.

“We have to.” Connor stumbled into me as I fought to free myself but quickly regained his balance, locking his arms around me.

“Let me fight!” I struggled, desperate to go back but not wanting to hurt the Searcher who was dragging me away.

“No!” Connor’s face was like stone. “You heard him. We’re gone. And if you go wolf on me, I swear I’ll knock you out!”

“Please.” My eyes burned when I saw Ren’s fangs gleam and my breath stopped when Monroe dropped his swords.

“What is he doing?” I cried, dodging when Connor tried to grab me again.

“This is his fight now,” he said through clenched teeth. “Not ours.”

Ren jumped back as the swords clanged on the ground in front of him. Though his hackles were still raised, his growl died.

“Listen to me, Ren,” Monroe said, crouching to meet Ren at eye level, not looking at the other two wolves bearing down on him with cruel slowness. “You still have a choice. Come with me and know who you really are. Leave all this behind.”

Ren’s short, sharp bark ended in a confused whimper. The other three
wolves continued stalking toward the Searcher, undeterred by their enemy having abruptly laid down his arms.

Connor’s arm swung around my neck, catching me in a painful headlock. “We can’t watch this,” he snapped, slowly wrestling me out of the room. “Ren, please!” I shouted. “Don’t choose them! Choose me!”

Ren turned at the desperation in my voice, watching Connor pull me through the doorway. He shifted forms, staring bewildered at Monroe’s outstretched hands, and took a step toward him.

“Who are you?”

Monroe’s voice shook. “I’m—”

“Enough! You’re a fool, boy,” Emile snarled at Ren before smiling at Monroe. “Just like your father.”

And then he was leaping through the air, shifting into wolf form—a thick bundle of fur, fangs, and claws. I saw him slam into Monroe, jaws locking around the unarmed man’s throat, a moment before I was whipped around.

Ren didn’t look at me when he spoke, ripping me free from the blur of memories. “When he laid down his swords, I thought he was crazy. Maybe suicidal. But there was something about his scent. It was familiar, like I knew it.”

I watched as he struggled to speak. “But what Emile said. I didn’t understand at first. Until he . . . until Monroe was bleeding. The scent of his blood. I knew there was a connection.”

“He loved your mother.” My tears ran so hot I could have sworn they were scoring my cheeks. “He tried to help her escape. A group of the Banes wanted to rebel.”

“When I was one,” he said. “Yes.”

Ren sat on the bed, his face buried in his hands.

“Monroe left a letter.” I knelt in front of him. “He wanted us to bring you back.”

“It doesn’t matter now,” Ren said.
“How can you say that?”

He lifted his face. The ragged expression on his face felt like claws in my chest.

“Where would I belong, Calla?” he asked. “I don’t have a place in that world. Even if my mother tried to go there and my father used to be there. Both of them are gone. Dead. Dead because of the life I do belong to. There isn’t anything that links me to the Searchers. I’d only be an enemy to them.”

I understood his feelings too well. We’d both lost so much. Our pack had been torn apart. Our families broken. But there was still hope. The Searchers proved themselves to me when I fought beside them. They weren’t so different from Guardians. We were all warriors, and we’d shed blood for each other. Our enemies had become friends, and the wolves could find a new home among the Searchers. I believed that, but I needed to make Ren believe it too.

I grabbed his hands, squeezing his fingers tight. “You do have a link to the Searchers.”

“What?” He was startled by my fierce words.

“Monroe has a daughter,” I said. “Her name is Ariadne.”

“He has a daughter?” Ren asked.

“You have a sister. A half sister.”

“Who’s her mother?” He stood transfixed, a flurry of emotions racing through his eyes.

“A woman who helped him when he was mourning Corrine,” I said. “But Adne’s mother is dead too.”

I bowed my head, thinking of how many people this war had destroyed. I pushed the grief away, trying to focus on Ren. “She’s two years younger than us. And she’s the reason I’m here.”

“She’s the reason,” he said.

“Yes,” I said, frowning as he scowled. “We should go.”

“You should go,” he murmured. “They want Shay and you. Even with a sister, I don’t fit into that equation.”
His words were like a slap in the face.

“It’s not enough.” He looked at me sadly. “She’s a Searcher. I’m a Guardian. What am I without a pack?”

My stomach lurched. How often had I asked that very question of myself? The pack was the essence of an alpha. We were meant to lead, to bond with our packmates. Take that away, and life lost its meaning.

His eyes were on me. “What do you want?”

“What?” I stared at him.

“Can you give me a reason to go with you?”

“I already have,” I said, quivering as his words sank in.

“No,” he said, leaning toward me. “You’ve given me reasons, but not your reason.”

“But—” My words were hushed, shaky.

His fingers traced the lines where my tears had fallen. It was a light touch, barely brushing my cheek. But it felt like flames chased each other across my skin.

“Give me a reason, Calla,” he whispered.

I gazed at him. Blood roared in my ears. My veins were on fire. There wasn’t any doubt in my mind as to what he was asking. But I couldn’t give him what he wanted.

Ren’s dark eyes were full of pain, a pain for which he thought I was the only salve.

“Ren,” I whispered. “I want—”

And then I was leaning over him, my cropped hair brushing against his cheeks as I bent to kiss him. Our lips met and I felt like I was diving into oblivion. The kiss grew deep, immediate and hungry. He lifted me up and I wrapped my legs around his waist, molding my body against his. Our kisses were so full of need, so long, so fierce that I could hardly gasp for breath. He laid me on the bed. Our bed.

His hands slipped beneath my shirt, stroking my stomach, sliding up, pushing aside my bra. I moaned and bit his lip, reveling in
the full press of his weight against me as our bodies began to move together.


I heard my own cry of pleasure as his mouth followed the path of his hands, and I struggled for thought in the face of torrid sensation.

*I shouldn’t be doing this. I can’t be doing this.*

My mind reeled as I called up the image of Shay. He’d been the one to open this world to me. His hands, his body had set my soul on fire for the first time. I’d wanted him so much, and at that moment I was sure Ren was lost, that he’d chosen the Keepers’ path, I’d drowned my grief by giving in to the flood of desire for Shay.

But what if Ren hadn’t chosen? What if we’d left him behind too soon? What if Monroe had been right?

When I’d been faced with encounters like these with Ren in the past, I’d been restrained by the Keepers’ Laws, always afraid to give myself over to the passion he stirred inside me.

I loved Shay. I had no doubts about that. But I couldn’t deny the powerful reaction I had to Ren, to how much he wanted me. I wondered if there was a bond between us that couldn’t be broken, forged from our shared pasts, born out of the pain of our life as Guardians. Was that bond stronger than the new love that had sprung up between Shay and me?

Ren’s hand slipped between my thighs and I shivered. My body knew what was coming and it screamed for more. If I’d had any notion that being with Shay would have smothered the allure of Ren’s caress, it was swept away in that moment. Through my night in the garden with Shay, I’d had my first taste of lovers’ secrets, and I was intoxicated with wanting to know the ways Ren would bring my body to life. And I wondered if giving him that pleasure would somehow take away the horrors he’d been dealt because of me. His touch pulled me back in time, into a past where we were together as it was
always meant to be. Where my mother was alive and my brother wasn’t broken.

His lips were on mine again. I twined my fingers in his dark hair.

“I love you,” he murmured, briefly breaking the kiss. “I’ve always loved you.”

My heart skipped a beat. “I—”

It was like Shay was there, whispering in my ear.

You loved him.

Yes.

But not the way you love me.

I love you.

Shay. I’d only ever said those words to Shay. I didn’t want that to change.

What the hell am I doing? I loved Ren. I still loved him. But this place, these intimate ghosts that held me in this room, on this bed, murmuring of past promises and stolen dreams, none of it was my life now. Lingering here, no matter what my feelings, only kept us from escaping a fate we hadn’t chosen for ourselves.

My pulse was racing. Ren kissed me again, but I felt like I was in the arms of a restless spirit that haunted me and not the lover I wanted.


“Don’t,” he said, moving his mouth over my neck. “Don’t do that, Calla. Don’t try to leave. Just be here. Be with me.”

Couldn’t he see it? There was no here. This place was empty, full of nothing but sadness and—if we lingered—death.

“Ren,” I said, pushing at him gently but firmly. I was beginning to panic but didn’t want to show it. Every word, every move had to be chosen with the utmost care. If I said the wrong thing, I might send Ren running back to the Keepers. While I couldn’t be with him the way he wanted, not here, not now—maybe not ever—I wasn’t going to lose him either. “It’s not safe.”

“What?” He straightened, blinking at me. “Oh. Oh, of course.
Look, Calla, I’m sorry about the other girls. I know that must be strange for you, and it wasn’t fair, but I swear I was always careful. I’m completely healthy. It’s safe.”

I stared at him and then burst into laughter.

“I’m not lying,” he said, looking slightly injured by my outburst.

“No,” I said, trying to catch my breath. “I believe you.”

“Good.” He smiled and leaned in for another kiss. But I squirmed away; the passion that had caught me off guard when I’d first found Ren wouldn’t snare me again. This place was dangerous for both of us.

“No,” I said again. “I meant it’s not safe because the people who built this house want me dead. We’re using time we don’t have. We need to go.”

“Not yet.” He reached for me. “We aren’t in danger. No one comes here. Not ever.”

His words made me shiver as I wondered how many times Ren had come here. How often was he forced to be a lone wolf rather than the pack’s alpha?

“Yes, yet.” I sidestepped to dodge his hands. “Adne’s waiting out there. Your sister.”

Ren’s expression transformed, desire and frustration giving way to amazement.

“My sister,” he murmured. I made a mental note of his reaction, which I might need again. Ren’s alpha instincts—his need to claim me—could be diverted by Adne. She was the family he truly needed. His sister was the only link to a past that offered him salvation from the brutality of Emile. From the pain of knowing his mother had been killed by the Keepers and that he’d never known his real father.

“We can talk about this when we’re back at the Academy.” I hurried to fix my clothes, trying to ignore the guilt that tore through me. It was hurtling at me from both sides—I didn’t know what I’d say to Ren once we got out of Vail and I didn’t know what I’d tell
Shay about what had transpired here. My own feelings were a jumbled chaos that seemed impossible to untangle.

“You’re not getting out of this,” he growled, pulling me against him. “I’m not letting you go. Not again.”

“I know,” I said, not resisting when he kissed me, wondering just how deep a hole I was digging myself into. But I was afraid that saying anything to counter Ren’s hopes would make him change his mind about coming with me. I couldn’t let that happen.

“Good.”

I felt him smile through the kiss.

We left the bedroom, hurrying down the stairs. When we reached the front door, he paused, turning to look at his surroundings.

“It’s a shame,” he said. “It really is a nice house.”

“There are more important things in life than houses,” I said, reaching for the doorknob.

He put his hand over mine.

“There’s one more thing I need to tell you before we go,” he said.

“What?” I asked in a clipped voice, wanting to get back to a safe place and away from the seductive spirits that lingered here.

He leaned down, lips brushing my cheek as I opened the door. “I like your hair.”