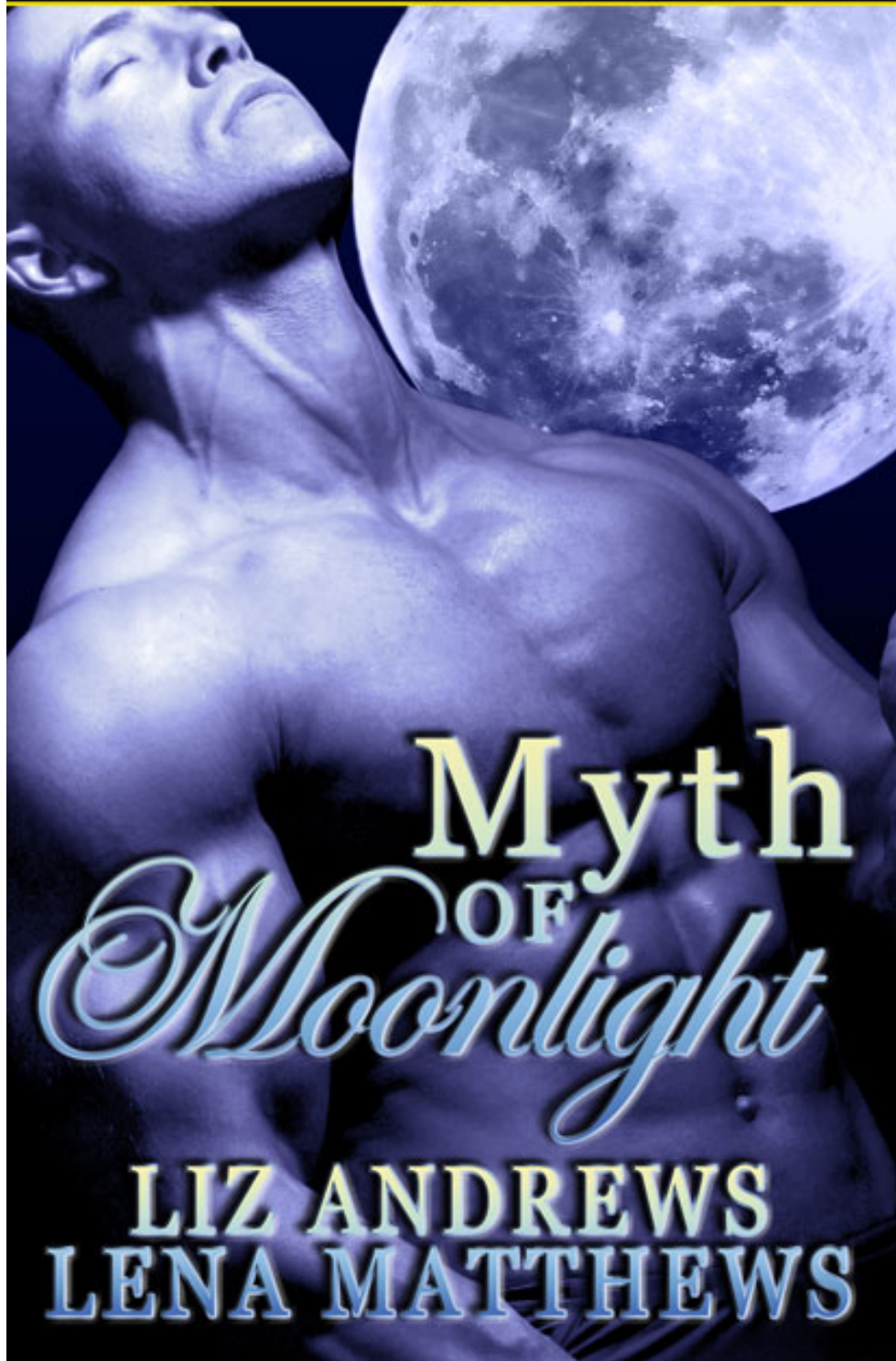


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



Myth  
OF  
*Moonlight*

LIZ ANDREWS  
LENA MATTHEWS

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Myth of Moonlight

ISBN # 9781419907029

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Edited by Mary Moran.

Cover art by Willo.

Electronic book Publication: January 2007

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# *MYTH OF MOONLIGHT*

**Lena Matthews & Liz Andrews**

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## Chapter One

There was something wild out there, dark and overwhelming, like the black starless night. The rapid pounding of Kimberly's heart obscured the sounds of crickets chirping and a night owl's hooting. Eyes wide, she turned and looked around. The surroundings were the same as before.

Deep within a forest she had only visited in her dreams, she was surrounded by an overwhelming sense of foreboding that made her hesitant to take another step. Whatever was out there was waiting for her. Stepping back slowly, she nervously jumped at the loud snap of a twig breaking under her bare feet. Immediately the wild sounds surrounding her came to a halt.

Easing her foot back quietly, Kimberly tried to make her way out of the darkness of the forest. The rustling of the bushes caused Kimberly to hold her breath in nervous desperation. He was back, just as she knew he'd be, but worst of all, he was back for her.

Afraid for her safety, she turned and began running through the dense forest. Uncaring about the sharp stabs to her cold bare feet, Kimberly ran as if her life depended on it. Trying to dodge as many objects in her way as possible, she kept fluid and low to the ground. It was impossible to avoid every obstacle and her eyes began to tear as the branches lashed at her face. Kimberly raised her hands to try and protect herself but she didn't slow down because she knew he was gaining on her.

Suddenly Kimberly tripped over a protruding tree trunk, falling to her hands and knees. The underbrush dug into her and she lay stunned for a moment. Realizing she was wasting precious time, she scrambled up. Disoriented from the fall, Kimberly looked around wildly, trying to gather her bearings. From her right, Kimberly heard the crackling of leaves and immediately took off in the opposite direction.

Time seemed to slow as she continued to run. Her pursuer was relentless, never giving her time to stop and catch her breath. The forest seemed never-ending, as great an adversary as the one pursuing her. Kimberly began to grow tired and realized it was only a matter of time until he caught her. She couldn't think – she didn't know what to do. Tripping and falling a second time she lay on the ground, breathing harshly from her exertion. Abruptly, Kimberly realized she could hear breathing behind her as well. He'd found her. Turning, she gazed into glowing eyes and screamed.

Kimberly jolted upright. Perspiration drenched her body as she flopped back down on the bed. Her heart was racing.

*It was only a nightmare.* Even though she was safe, home alone in her bed, the thought did little to appease her. If her dream had been a one-time occurrence, she

might have been able to blame it on the bad Chinese food she'd had the night before. But unfortunately, it was becoming a chillingly familiar nightly routine. The nightmares began a few months ago and had become progressively disturbing. At first, she dreamed someone was watching her. Later, it had turned into someone chasing her. Tonight was the first time she had seen him.

Yet she wasn't able to get a clear picture of him because all she had really seen were his glowing russet eyes. Kimberly knew what that meant—her pursuer was a Werewolf. Kimberly knew because she was one too. Although she knew what she was, she just didn't know what it meant. She'd never lived with the Pack, her family had broken from them before she was born. The only connection she had to that part of herself was the beast lying dormant within her and bedtime stories she had heard as a child from her parents.

Getting up, Kimberly walked into the bathroom, flipping on the light to study her ashen face in the mirror. The phantom stalker was beginning to wear on her. Dark bags underneath her eyes made it appear as if she had lost a fight instead of merely tossing and turning all night.

Deep down, what frightened her most was her dreams weren't always terrifying. Sometimes she wanted to stop, turn around and see who was chasing her. But to do so would leave her open to a reality she knew she wasn't ready to face. Her fear was neck and neck with her curiosity and Kimberly wasn't sure which part of her consciousness would win. Shaking her head at the thought, she hopped into the shower to get an early start on the day.

\* \* \* \* \*

Stepping into her office, Kimberly hung up her coat and headed toward the break room to grab a cup of coffee. She enjoyed early mornings like this when the office wasn't too busy yet. Even though the law office was small, Lewis and Sinclair had a vibrant practice and she usually worked nonstop.

Work hadn't always been so exciting, but since her recent promotion from file clerk to paralegal, life had become so much more interesting. It was exciting for Kimberly to finally be making her own money. It was just further proof she could live on her own, despite her brother's vehement protests.

Even David couldn't complain about Bayside, except that it was a few hundred miles away from him, which to Kimberly was a plus in itself, besides the many other perks that came with the beautiful, picturesque town. A quiet little city right on the edge of the redwood forests, Bayside was filled with open-air markets and shopping galore. It wasn't so "small town" that everyone knew everyone else's business, nor was it too large that it was an impersonal metropolis. It fit Kimberly just right, much as her new job did.

Walking into the break room, Kimberly stopped short and muttered under her breath when she noticed the crowd. Maybe she wasn't the only person having

nightmares. The doors didn't officially open until nine, yet already there were people bumbling about. Turning, she paused when she caught the earthy scent in the air. Nose flaring, she turned back to scan the faces of her coworkers. The musky odor had recently become as familiar to her as the back of her hand. Her senses were heightened because of what she was, but her youth prevented her from being able to home in on those abilities.

Kimberly's lip tensed and curled up a bit at the edge but she bit back the emotions clawing from inside her. There was someone impinging on her territory. Narrowing her eyes, she had to force herself to relax and refrain from giving the warning growl tickling the back of her throat. Kimberly wouldn't give in to her beast. She was not an animal, despite her split DNA.

*Caffeine*, all she needed was a shot of java and she could get through the day. Trying to ease closer to the coffeepot, Kimberly rocked from one foot to the other for several seconds, trying to patiently wait her turn before giving up and turning away. Halfway out of the room a voice called to her, freezing her in her tracks.

"Cream and sugar, right?"

Kimberly would recognize Nico Cassamonti's sultry, sexy voice anywhere. He was one of Lewis and Sinclair's very high-profile clients, which was one of the reasons he had access to parts of the building other clients did not. The Powers That Be wanted to keep him and his money as happy as humanly possible, and for some odd reason it seemed to please Nico to mingle with the underlings. She had only become aware of him when she started her new paralegal job and finally allowed in the break room on the third floor. Prior to her promotion she'd been tucked away in the file room and never had the opportunity to meet any of the clients, and now it seemed as if she couldn't go three feet without bumping into them, Nico especially.

Not that it was a bad thing though, because Nico was a walking god. He was tall and muscular, with thick black hair and eyes so dark she couldn't tell exactly what color they were. Although she secretly lusted after him, in her heart she knew he was way out of her league. He was worth more than some small countries and she was barely scraping by on her salary. Kimberly seriously doubted they had much in common.

"I'm sorry, were you speaking to me?"

"No need to apologize, Ms. Brenin." He turned with two coffee cups in his hands and tried to hand one of them to her. Kimberly hesitated and took a step back.

"Thank you, but no, Mr. Cassamonti," she murmured, her gaze darting around the room, hunting for the nearest escape.

Nico shook his head mockingly. "What have I told you? Please call me Nico."

"I really don't think it would be wise," she stammered, avoiding the cup as if it were poison instead of coffee. Kimberly always seemed to stammer around him and she had no idea why he made her uneasy. It could have had something to do with the fact Nico towered over nearly every other man in the room. Or it could have been the way he always seemed to look directly into her soul, but either way, she was never

comfortable being in his presence for too long. And it was one reason she shied away from him.

"But I insist." Nico held the cup firmly out in front of him, daring her to refuse. Aware of everyone eyeing them speculatively, Kimberly cautiously reached out and took the cup, not wanting to give the group more reason to stare.

Just then, two of the firm's associates walked into the room addressing Nico and starting up a brief conversation about business. Kimberly breathed a sigh of relief and quickly escaped. Even though she didn't dare glance back, she could sense Nico watching her. His gaze caused a tingling sensation down her spine. She didn't know what to make of it. Maybe she was imagining something where there was nothing.

Of course she seemed to be doing that a lot lately. Her late-night dreams and the lingering musky scent were beginning to wear on her nerves. The odd scent was becoming more frequent and pronounced, but unfortunately, she still couldn't pin down the source. As she approached her desk, Kimberly heard the phone ringing. Hurrying over, she picked up the phone, "Lewis and Sinclair, Ms. Reynolds' office, Kimberly speaking, how may I help you?"

"Come home for a visit."

Closing her eyes, Kimberly said a silent prayer for patience before opening them slowly and letting out a calming breath. It had only been a few days since she had last talked to her brother, yet he insisted on trying to keep long-distance tabs on her. "David, why are you calling me here?"

"What, a brother can't call his sister for a chat?"

"David, I can't talk at work, please understand."

"Then come home for a visit so we can talk."

"I can't. I've been working a lot of long hours since I was promoted to this new job. I need to be here for a while." Kimberly knew her boss Cassandra would give her the time off if she asked, but it was a great excuse and she just didn't want to go home for a visit right now.

"Kimmie." Kimberly grimaced at the hated childhood nickname. "I need to talk to you about something important. I have been trying to reach you for a while now."

"How many times have I told you *never* to call me Kimmie?"

"Stop trying to change the subject." The irritation in her brother's voice rang over the line loud and clear.

"Look, my boss just came in, I've got to go." Kimberly crossed her fingers as she told the little white lie.

"Kimberly, please listen —"

"Sorry, David, bye." Kimberly quickly hung up the phone before he could continue the conversation. Putting her face in her hands, she took deep breaths, trying to find her center.

"Man trouble?"

Startled, Kimberly looked up into her boss' sympathetic face. She had only been working for Cassandra a little over a month, but what she'd seen from her time there she liked. Cassandra straddled the line of professionalism and friendliness carefully, but she never seemed cold or distant. Always willing to listen, she would have been someone whom Kimberly confided in, if she could have. But she doubted her boss, no matter how sympathetic she was, would understand her issues.

"You could say that."

"Men can be such animals sometimes."

Kimberly smirked at the irony. "You don't know the half of it."

"I don't know, I've had my share of horrible suitors."

"What about smart-ass older brothers?"

The pretty blonde leaned against the corner of Kimberly's desk with a smile. "I've dealt with older brothers but I was never blessed with one."

"Trust me, it's not a blessing." Kimberly felt horrible for saying them the minute the words left her mouth.

David, in all his protective glory, loved and cared for her very much. He had been her rock after their parents died and she didn't know what she would have done without him. But that was eleven years ago and Kimberly was no longer a child. However, instead of letting go, David still clung to her, eventually forcing her to move hundreds of miles away just so she could breathe. He was caring and supportive for sure – but a blessing, hardly.

"Oh it can't be all that bad."

"You're right, I do remember lots of good times when we were kids. Too bad he can't accept I've grown up."

"Sounds as if your brother needs a new hobby."

"What he needs is a girlfriend." Kimberly looked at Cassandra speculatively, wondering if she could fix them up. Nah, it would be career suicide, she decided in the next instant. If they broke up, it would make things awkward, but if Cassandra found out they were Werewolves, it would really spice up the office gossip mill.

Cassandra stood abruptly with a look of exaggerated fear. "I saw that look and you can forget it, girlfriend."

Kimberly laughed, glad her bad mood had been broken, if only for a few moments. "You better run before I start picking out songs for the wedding."

Cassandra smiled warmly before warning, "Get to work and *maybe* I'll forget you ever said anything."

"Aye, aye, captain."

Laughing, Kimberly turned back to her desk and tried to focus on work. Just as she was getting in to the flow of things, Kimberly looked up and spotted Nico standing in the doorway, watching her intently. He didn't say anything, just watched her for a few seconds before turning and walking away.

His stare didn't creep her out as much as it filled her with a sense of foreboding, driving home the fact she didn't want to run into him again, if she didn't have to. With that thought in mind, Kimberly threw herself into her work, mindful of the passing hours until she could escape to her home, safe away from Nico and his overpowering presence.

For the first time in a long time, Kimberly was one of the first people out of the office. Although she usually liked to work late, she felt mentally exhausted. Worrying about the increased sensations she'd been experiencing, the constant nightmares and the unsettling aura of Nico Cassamonti were wearing her down. The only thing she wanted was a strong drink, a hot shower and her bed, not necessarily in any particular order. Breaking away from the crowd, Kimberly headed toward the rear of the garage where she'd parked her car.

As she neared the car, Kimberly felt a strange sense of déjà vu. Just as in her nightmare, she felt as if someone were watching her. She glanced around, didn't see anyone, but it didn't deter her from slowing down. A familiar scent wafted in the air, the one she'd decided today was only in her imagination.

Deciding she didn't care if she looked like an idiot, Kimberly began running toward her car. She wasn't afraid of who was following her – well, not entirely – but it was hard to control the beast when her adrenaline started pumping. Controlling the beast was one of the main reasons she took yoga, so she could learn how to maintain her calm. The last thing Kimberly needed was to change in front of someone looking for some fast money. Unfortunately her heels were her downfall and she couldn't run very fast in them without twisting her ankle and falling. Heart racing she stopped, refusing to move a step farther. She had to calm down and calm down now before she gave the security cameras something good to look at.

The air stilled around her. It was there again, like in her dreams, and a feeling more powerful than her fear and her beast combined called to her. Kimberly felt a powerful force directly behind her getting closer and closer. Dropping her bag, she balled her fists and abruptly turned, coming face-to-face with not only her dream but with Nico.

Her gasp slipped from her mouth as Nico stepped toward her, closing the gap between them. Unexpectedly Kimberly was overwhelmed by the scents and sensations around her. She swayed, reaching out to steady herself. Looking up, she realized she had grasped his arm and jerked back. His dark eyes glowed down at her and his lips tilted up at the sides, bringing his canine teeth into view. The familiar musky scent was heavy in the air and her eyes widened as she realized not only who he was but what he was.

"It's about damn time you recognized me," Nico growled.

The fear in her eyes did nothing but heighten Nico's awareness of her. He could smell it on her, just as he could smell her heat, strong and deep and very, very spicy. Nico had known from the first moment he saw her at Lewis and Sinclair who she was. No – what she was. In fact, he had waited patiently for her to come to him but she seemed to shy away, forcing Nico to take matters into his own hands.

Biding his time, Nico gathered as much information about her as he could, wanting to see what she was up to. So far, he'd come up with zilch about who she was or where she came from and it didn't make any sense. It was against Lycan Law for any Werewolf to come into another's territory without first gaining permission or making an offering, and Kimberly had done neither. He could have her head if he wanted, but he wanted something more.

"Of course I recognized you. You're a client—"

Snarling, he tightened his grip on her arm. "That's not what I meant and you know it. Talk fast."

Awareness caused her eyes to light up, but she continued to protest. "I don't know what you mean."

Pulling her closer to him, he growled low in his throat and watched in approval when she lowered her eyes as was custom. "Who are you and why are you here?"

Kimberly licked her full lips nervously and tilted her head farther down. "I didn't know, honestly."

"Lies!"

"No, I swear. I didn't know there were others here." Her pulse tattooed against his fingers pressed hard on her wrist, but despite her nervousness, Nico could tell she was telling the truth. Lies, like fear, omitted a scent as obvious as darting eyes.

"Whom do you belong to?" His comment brought her head up fast. The deference he saw only moments before was gone and in its stead was an arrogance and will as strong as he'd ever seen. Nico preferred it to her submission.

"To no one."

"You're a rogue?" he asked astonished.

"No. I'm my own."

That was impossible. There were no unprotected female Weres anywhere. Even the other Were-animals never left their females alone. Ever since the Purification War, female Weres had become protected and cherished. Were births had dropped off dramatically in the last few generations and female Weres even more so. It was why the female Weres were treasured as much as they were. The survival of their species depended on it, especially these days. "Now I know you're lying to me."

Pulling her arm free, Kimberly step backed and widened her stance. Her body warned of her fight-or-flight mentality and part of Nico—a very large part—hoped she would choose the latter. Nothing was more exciting than chasing prey. "I'm not lying. I'm on my own."

"Where's your mate?"

"I don't have one." From the bittersweet smell radiating off her like heat, Nico knew that at least was true as far as logistics were concerned. Virgins had the sweetest scent of all. Especially when they were about to enter puberty, a later stage for female Weres, a precursor to going into heat, as Kimberly was.

Her heat wasn't the only thing that attracted her to Nico. From the first time he spotted her, she captured his attention. Smaller than a pup, Kimberly appeared as delicate as a flower, but up close, Nico could see the storm brewing in her hazel eyes. Skin as smooth as silk with a splatter of freckles across the bridge of her small nose, she resembled a pixie instead of the wild animal he knew she could be. It was hard for Nico to reconcile how anyone could let her wander about freely. If she were his, he'd have her marked, mated and heavy with his child before she blinked.

"Impossible."

"Look, I already apologized. What else do you want?"

"What do you mean, what do I want?" Nico was incredulous at her total lack of knowledge about their culture. "You should be making proper retribution to the *Benandanti*."

"And just what would proper retribution be and what the hell is a *Benandanti*?"

Nico stared at Kimberly for a moment before answering. *Was she kidding?* He had never experienced a female Were so totally unfamiliar with the Werewolf life. Were pups were taught from a very early age how proper retribution was to be given to all elders in the Pack, not only by age but by rank. And the fact she didn't know who or what a *Benandanti* was, was terrifying. What kind of Pack did she grow up in that was without a leader? Who'd looked out for her before she wandered onto his land?

"Let's start with the most important answer. A *Benandanti* is the leader. The head Were in charge. And he's the one you owe the retribution to, which can be anything from a fresh kill for his Pack, to monetary compensation or a mate."

"Well, since I'm in the know, I'll head straight out and slaughter a deer worthy of his forgiveness. Do points get taken away for roadkill?" Kimberly's annoyed tone amused Nico. If he didn't sense her sincerity, he would have had a hard time believing she was a Werewolf. Kimberly was the most un-intimidating wolf he had ever seen in all his life. Nico had known pups with fiercer growls.

"It's not only you who owes the debt," he added, trying to get at the truth. "Everyone must be held accountable."

"There isn't an 'everyone'. That's what I've been trying to tell you." Her voice echoed in the empty parking structure, causing her denial to ring even clearer.

"You're lying. I can tell." And it was pissing him off.

"I'm not lying," she argued, her scent rising off her like steam.

Confusion muddled her hazel eyes, making her irises appear darker and deeper than possible. "If I can speak to this *Benandanti* person, I can clear this up."

Who did she think she was talking to? Anyone else would have recognized him from the get-go, but his sheltered pup had no idea just who she was dealing with. "So far you haven't been doing a great job of clearing anything up."

Awareness dawned, widening her eyes with shock. If he weren't so pissed off at her, Nico might have found the whole situation funny as hell, but she was too close to danger for him to laugh it off.

"I didn't know."

"As was apparent from your total lack of respect." Nico stepped closer, forcing her back against the car behind her. Finally reassured Kimberly wasn't a threat, he allowed his canines to retract. Nico didn't want to frighten her, because if she were too scared to talk, he wouldn't ever find out what she was doing there.

Kimberly growled low in her throat, protesting his dominant move, trying to warn him away. The steel was back again, this time spreading from her fiery eyes to her backbone.

"Free lesson, *Zingaro*. A threat is only viable if the person is willing to go through with it."

"If you want me out of town by nightfall, consider it done," she shot back, offering the one thing he refused to consider.

Damn it! This wasn't the way he had wanted to approach her but she'd resisted all his efforts up to now to get her alone. Nico could tell she was frightened, any normal person would be in this situation, but he couldn't shake off his feelings of frustration. Kimberly wasn't normal, and as a Were, she should be more experienced in shielding her emotions. By not doing so, she was situating herself as a target for every creature under the moon.

Nothing attracted animals as much as fear and weakness, and Nico could tell Kimberly hadn't yet embraced her beast. She was afraid of it, and her fear, coupled with her heat, called to him. He didn't know whether to chase her or fuck her—both thoughts made him hard as hell. "You're not going anywhere until I tell you you can go somewhere."

"I'm not your problem." Her hand nervously went to her neck and she gave a slight scratch at the reddening area just above her collarbone.

"In a few nights you're going to be more than my problem."

"What are you talking about?"

"You can't be serious, *Zingaro*." No Werewolf reached puberty without being aware of the dangers of full moons and mating season. "You're in heat and there won't be a Were for miles around who won't be able to sense it."

"You're out of your fucking mind." Her denial vibrated in her words.

"And you're either naïve or dumb," he growled. Kimberly didn't know what she was doing. She wasn't only endangering herself, she was also endangering their very existence. No Were alive would be able to resist her call. Female Weres gave out a mating scent when they went into puberty, a way of announcing to male Weres they were ready to accept a mate. It wasn't only wolves attracted to the scent, any second-nature man within smelling distance would also be drawn to Kimberly. She would be

marked and mated in a matter of minutes and she would have no one to blame but herself. Even if she didn't understand the how, she damn sure needed to know the why. "Come with me and I'll explain everything."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Lycan Law."

"I'm not in your Pack."

"That's where you're wrong. According to Lycan Law, *Zingaro*, if you're unmated and unclaimed and you're in my territory, you belong to me." It was officially Nico's new favorite law. Anything to put Kimberly under his watchful eyes worked for him.

"Stop calling me that!"

"What?"

"*Zingaro* or whatever. My name is Kimberly."

"I know very well what your name is, Kimberly." He said her name as if it were a caress. "But *Zingaro* is fitting as well. It means 'my little gypsy'. My Were without a home."

"I have a home but more importantly, I don't belong to you. I don't belong to anyone."

She was such an innocent. It was rewarding and annoying at the same time. Nico couldn't imagine who would have let her leave without warning her about the ways of the world. "Not up on your rules and regulations?"

"Are we beasts or are we goddamn democrats?"

"Everything has laws, even in nature. The strong survive, that is the law of nature."

"If you say Lycan Law one more time, I'm going to scream."

"Prepare to scream," he warned, and to his amazement Kimberly opened her mouth to do so. Moving quickly, Nico covered her mouth with his hand. There was no doubt about it, her meekness didn't carry to the bone.

Threading his other hand through the auburn curls hanging loosely at the back of her head, Nico gripped the silky strands and used them as an anchor to hold her in place. Kimberly's eyes widened, not with fear as he thought they might, but with something closer to passion. The fever was upon her, and if she didn't submit soon, there would be hell to pay.

"Not only do you need a keeper but you also need a history book."

Eyes narrowing, Kimberly reached up and pulled his hand away from her mouth. "They have books on this?" she asked in wonder.

She kept surprising him. Shaking his head, he asked in shock, "Where were you raised?"

"Around." The squeal of tires swung both their heads toward the entrance as a white Volkswagen Bug pulled into the parking garage. "This isn't the place for this conversation."

Finally, she said something he could agree with. "Fine. I'll follow you home."

"That's not what I meant."

"For as long as you're in my territory, you'll do as I say. Unattached female Weres need all the support they can get. My Pack will help you through this."

"Through what?"

"You really can't be so naïve?"

"What are you talking about?" The irritation in her tone nearly matched the level of his frustration.

"Don't you wonder why I knew who you were? Why you're so antsy and can't keep still."

"You're the *Benandanti*, you can sense things."

"Yes," he said, nodding his head slowly, "and one of the things I can sense is you're in heat."

"What!" The smell of fear rolled off her in waves. The engaging scent actually overpowered the aroma of her heat, an amazing feat when she was this close to her time. The look of shock and despair on her beautiful face made Nico feel horrible. He hated breaking this to her so abruptly, in the middle of a parking garage, but she wasn't leaving him much choice. Her safety was on the line and she was running out of time.

"Your body is readying itself for mating. How could you reach puberty without knowing these things?" Whoever her *Benandanti* was, he needed to be skinned and mounted on a wall. It made absolutely no sense that Kimberly was so unprepared for the world.

"I'm a slow learner," she replied snidely, scratching again at her neck.

Nico's eyes narrowed on her neck and he had to bite back a curse. Her time was upon her and she was in no way prepared. "It's time, Kimberly. You'll need my protection. If you're not linked by the time of the full moon, you'll have every Were sniffing at your door. I won't have my territory tarnished."

"Then I'll leave." The hell she would and Nico was getting damn tired of her threatening to run away from him.

"The only place you're going is home with me. You need me—us—and you need us now."

"It will go away. It has before."

"No, it's only simmering below the surface, waiting for the right time to come out." Shaking his head, Nico picked up her hand and held it out in front of her. "Look at your pulse, *Zingaro*, practically beating out of your fragile flesh. Your nerves are raw, you're shaking and I can smell the moisture gathering between your thighs."

Nico's tongue felt heavy in his mouth. He wanted to delve between her legs and drink the juices beckoning him. Kimberly wasn't even in full force yet and she already had him feeling like a randy dog. There was no telling what would happen in six days

when the moon was full and her heat blossomed. He could have a WWE riot on his hands. "It's only going to get worse. I can ease your pain."

Licking her lips, Kimberly asked nervously, "How?"

Herbs, meditation and the right amount of control were methods taught to Lupas when they were young, but nothing could be done for Kimberly now that didn't involve long hours of fierce loving. She was becoming prime and ready for her mating, and Nico was beginning to feel as if he were the Were for the job.

There would even come a point, once she was in tune with her beast, when Kimberly would be able to control her need to mate altogether. If she had been raised right, brought up right, her needs wouldn't even be an issue. But she wasn't and therein lay the real problem. "Come with me."

"No," she said again, refusing to give in. "I can handle this on my own."

Cursing in Italian, Nico turned from her, trying to calm his libido and his temper. As *Benandanti* he had the right to assert his wants over hers, as a wolf, he had the desire to force her to her knees and take what was rightfully his, but as a man, he knew he couldn't. The hardest part of being all three was trying to find the even plateau.

Turning back, Nico looked her steadily in the eye. He wanted to give her the option to come to him willingly, even if he knew she couldn't do it herself. Sometimes the pretense of control over one's destiny was just as good as the real thing. "You have four days to bring this to an end on your own. By nightfall on the fourth day, if you haven't cooled the fever, then I will come for you."

"Four days isn't enough time."

"It's all you have." Nico wasn't risking her health or wellbeing. If Kimberly made him, he would play the Alpha card and to hell with the plateau.

## Chapter Two

Kimberly was still unsteady when she walked into her apartment. Leaning against her closed door, she sighed and shook her head in disbelief. Nico Cassamonti, the hottie she had been secretly lusting after, was a frickin' Werewolf. Oh yeah, and by the way, she was in heat. Unbelievable. It was too much to take in all at one time. Just when she thought she was getting the hang of her dual existence, something jumped up and bit her on the ass, or wanted to from the look in Nico's eyes.

For the first time since leasing her apartment, the familiar scent of home did little to warm her. Normally when Kimberly had a bad day, the first place she wanted to run to was her apartment, the place she had made her own private sanctuary. She had painstakingly decorated each room on a shoestring budget, furnished mostly from secondhand stores but enhanced with love. Each room represented Kimberly's own interpretation of the forest and it was a haven for when she wanted to escape from the real world. Yet now, Nico had messed that up for her as well. Instead of the instant feeling of relaxation she normally experienced, Kimberly was more tense than when she had woken up from her dream.

Tossing her briefcase onto her dining room table, Kimberly quickly kicked off her shoes, needing to release everything confining her. Opening the fridge, Kimberly sighed with relief as she noted half a bottle of Chardonnay. Maybe her day had sucked but this evening she was going to enjoy a glass of wine, read a good book, go to bed and forget this day ever happened.

Looking across the room, Kimberly groaned as she saw the red blinking light on her answering machine. She hit the button to play messages then headed toward the cupboard for a glass. Much to her dismay, David's agitated voice boomed over the speaker.

"Kimberly, you're being immature. We really do have to talk and you can't keep avoiding my calls."

"Gee, I wonder what you've got to tell me," Kimberly called out to the empty room. "Maybe I'm in heat and there's more to being a Were than you ever told me." While she had been voicing her frustrations, Kimberly had missed a portion of David's message but it didn't stop him from talking.

"We have so much to talk about." Kimberly snorted as she filled her glass, her frustration level rising with the wine. "There are things I...things I should have explained to you before now."

"You think?"

"But I refuse to do it over the phone, so call me."

"Dream on."

"Or I'll do something we'll both regret."

"Too late," she shouted at the phone. Taking a big gulp, Kimberly tried to calm her nerves. She hoped her hormones were acting out, otherwise she was in a world of trouble because not only was she in heat, Kimberly also seemed to be on the verge of mental collapse.

The chilled wine instantly began to take effect, calming her with a false sense of security. Kimberly knew better than to drink alcohol this close to the full moon but if ever there was a night to indulge, it was tonight.

She was not going to think about Werewolves, being in heat or her four-day deadline. It was only a big deal if she made it one. She had controlled this "heat" thing before and she could do it again if she had to. It was all an issue of mind over matter.

Opening the refrigerator again, Kimberly took out a ham she'd cooked the night before and cut off a generous slice before heading back into the newly decorated living room. The ivy painted walls, chosen because of its resemblance to underbrush, did little to soothe her shattered nerves. The living room, normally her favorite room in the apartment, now seemed like a cage. Her beast wanted to break free and run, but this was neither the time nor the place.

Kimberly closed her eyes, chanting softly to herself, trying to calm her wayward chi. It was a meditation trick she'd picked up in yoga and surprisingly it went a long way to appeasing her. After taking a deep breath, Kimberly opened her eyes again, feeling a shade more in control.

Despite what Nico said, she was her own person and she would handle the heat in her own way and in her own time. Now a bit more at ease, Kimberly walked across the room to her secondhand oak bookshelf, perusing it for an old favorite. She chose a book she hadn't read in a while and retired to her room with her meat and wine in hand. It wasn't a balanced diet but it would have to do.

After changing into one of David's old shirts, she climbed onto her four-poster bed and slid beneath her cotton sheets, ready to lose herself in the story. An hour and a completely empty glass later, Kimberly realized she'd reread the same paragraph three times. Sighing in frustration, she gave up, put her book down on her nightstand and turned off the lamp. The wine and the lack of rest from the night before soon lulled her to sleep and she sank into the dark abyss pulling at her.

As soon as she closed her eyes they opened again, but this time instead of her bedroom she was in a familiar forest, yet for once she was not running from someone. Instead of the previous panic feelings, Kimberly oddly anticipated what was to come. She began walking through the forest with a sense of purpose.

The forest seemed serene and although it was still night, she felt warmed as if by the sun. Kimberly looked around as she stepped into the grassy clearing, lush and full, almost tropical. It made her want to lie down and roll in the grass, letting the sharp, cool blades of grass comfort her like a downy quilt.

Looking down at herself, Kimberly saw she was wearing a sheer gown, something she would never wear in real life. Kimberly ran her hands down her body, enjoying the feel of the silk against her skin. This wasn't how the other dreams had started. In fact, Kimberly couldn't remember ever feeling this calm in her dreams before. Instead of panicking and running away, Kimberly decided to sit down next to a trickling brook running through the clearing. It was as beautiful as it was peaceful, another oddity for her nightmare.

All of a sudden a brisk wind picked up, rippling the water with its presences. And just as quickly as it had come, it disappeared and the earlier restlessness was back, bringing with it the sense of the unknown Kimberly had come to associate with the nighttime terrors. But still she wasn't scared, just anxious.

Suddenly she caught a familiar aroma and glanced around. A large gray wolf strode toward her on padded paws. It walked with a steady stride reminding her of someone. As it drew closer, the wolf gradually transformed, smoother than Kimberly had ever seen a wolf do in real life. The transformation didn't seem to require any concentration on the wolf's part. It happened so quickly and went so smoothly, the change almost appeared theatrical. With every step, segments of the beast disappeared and her wolf took human form.

Jumping up quickly, her eyes widened as she realized the same tawny eyes of the wolf were still possessed by the half-dressed man in front of her. His muscular chest was firm and smooth, a complete contrast from the animal he'd just transformed from. Kimberly was having a hard time tearing her eyes away from the sight of Nico shirtless before her but he seemed to have no such qualms.

Standing before her, strong and bold, his gaze slid down her body. He gave a low, appreciative whistle. "Nice, much more attractive than the bunny T-shirt."

His words brought her out her silent reverie. "The bunny T-shirt...oh my God. It's been you this entire time."

"So surprised, *Zingaro*?" Nico slowly walked around Kimberly, absorbing the full effect of her sheer gown. He brushed his hands along her back and shivers danced down her spine. Either she was going crazy or she was having the most realistic dream in her entire life.

"How are you doing this?" she questioned, her voice tinged with awe. The surreal dream was cool and creepy all at the same time. Nico was taking stalking to a whole other level with this freaky dream stuff.

"Which part?" Facing her again, he skimmed his hands slowly up her arms, coming to rest on her shoulders. Her flesh felt heated by his touch while she shivered with anticipation. Kimberly was afraid of the emotions rushing through her but she also wanted more. Nico slid his fingers under the thin spaghetti straps and toyed with her skin.

Shrugging her shoulders, Kimberly stepped back and looked around the meadow. It was practically a scene out of *Bambi*, all she needed was a cute little deer and a bunny with seizures. "Stop it, Nico, I'm serious."

"So serious," he teased, reaching out to touch her again.

Slapping at his hand, she frowned. "How are you doing all of this?"

"I'm surprised you haven't figured it out yet." Chuckling, Nico pulled back his abused hand and shook it as if it were hot. "It's a dream."

"Whose?"

"Does it matter?"

"Well, if it's my dream..." she snapped her fingers and the black pants he was wearing disappeared. Looking down at his engorged member, Kimberly wondered how much of his cock was her dream and how much was reality. A damn fine reality. "Mine. For sure."

"Now that's not fair." Snapping his fingers, Nico frowned when her gown didn't disappear. "Definitely your dream."

For the first time in a long time, Kimberly felt like smiling. "A girl could get used to this. I like the fact I can make anything I want happen."

"What else do you want to happen, *Zingaro*?" Nico's eyes were as predatory as when he was in his altered state. The air hummed around them, singing with electricity and desire. The hair on her arms stood on end and her womb felt heavy with need. "This is your dream. I'm at your command."

"I bet you don't say those words often." Kimberly licked her lips in anticipation. She felt as if someone had just given her the keys to a candy store and told her to dig in. Nico was like all her favorite treats combined into one. Every commandment broken, every sin committed, he was the epitome of bad and she couldn't wait to indulge.

"No, that's why you better act fast." Chuckling deep in his throat, he stepped behind her and pressed against her. Kimberly could feel every inch of him and her body shuddered in response. Her animal called to his, howling out to be mated and claimed. "*Zingaro*, you are trembling with your need. Let me help you."

It was less of a question and more of a demand, but it was exactly what Kimberly needed to hear to finally give herself over to him. It was just a dream, she reminded herself as she shimmied her shoulders and allowed the straps of her gown to slip down over her arms. Nico tugged from behind her and the gown slid down her frame, dropping to her feet like a puddle of silk.

Kimberly joined her gown on the cool grass. The ground was softer than she remembered but after all, it was her dream and she could control all the elements. Looking up as Nico dropped down in front of her, Kimberly had a hard time keeping the fact she was in control front and center. Despite what he said, she doubted very seriously if Nico would – let alone could – ever give up control.

Nico leaned over and nuzzled her collarbone, gently kissing and rubbing his face against her neck, covering her body with his scent and vice versa. Kimberly dug her nails in the grass as he nipped at her with his canines before slowly lowering himself down her body.

Pushing Kimberly's legs open with his knee, Nico slipped between her parted thighs. He moved up, pressing down into her, rubbing his cock against the juncture of her wet opening. His cock was scorching her pussy, hard as steel and just as heavy. Kimberly arched up into him, aching to have him fill her, but Nico didn't answer her advance. Instead, he took his time, kissing down her throat to the hollow between her breasts before turning his head to the side and capturing one of her aching peaks between his lips.

Kimberly cried out in pleasure as Nico teased her other breast with his fingers, rolling her nipple gently and then pinching it, bringing it to a taut peak. When she thought she would go mad, he moved his hand from her breast and stroked down her flat stomach to the wet heat of her entrance.

She sucked in her breath, waiting for the touch of his hand on her heated core. Nico surprised her however by moving his hands to her thighs, pushing her legs up and spreading them wide before sitting up and crouching on his haunches before her. Kimberly lay open before him as Nico's hot gaze viewed her hidden treasures.

"I wonder if you taste as good as you look."

"How do I taste?" Kimberly asked breathlessly.

Taking one finger, Nico stroked along her slit, causing her to jump at the unexpected touch. Sucking his finger into his mouth, Kimberly saw him savoring her essence.

"You taste like warm cream poured over succulent peaches soaked in brandy."

Stroking her again, Kimberly whimpered as Nico pulled his finger away from her arching hips.

"Taste yourself," Nico urged, spreading her juices along the seam of her lips. Kimberly sucked his finger into her mouth, running her tongue along the digit.

"Enough," Nico declared, pulling his finger out her mouth. "Appetizer is over, it's time to dine."

With that, Nico buried his face between her legs. Licking lightly along her opening, he reached up and spread her pussy lips, exploring with his tongue to learn her secrets. Kimberly arched into his mouth, trying to push his tongue deeper into her core.

She had never allowed herself to be so blatantly sexual with a man before because of the fear of her beast coming out. But with Nico she was liberated, and the feeling of letting go and allowing Nico to do whatever he wanted was so freeing. Of course it was only a dream, which meant she could do anything with no consequences.

Kimberly sobbed as Nico pulled back slightly and then gasped as his tongue circled her clit. She had been worried he was leaving her. He couldn't leave her when she was

so close. His rasping tongue was driving her to distraction, building her to a fevered pitch before backing off, leaving her panting with need.

"Please, I need..."

"What do you need?"

"I need to come, please." The pleasure Kimberly felt was so much more intense than when she touched herself. She masturbated, but she had never felt that if her orgasm didn't come she would just spontaneously combust, as she was feeling right now.

Nico smiled wolfishly before returning to his teasing of her aching folds. But still he didn't finish her off.

"Now, please."

Nico smiled at her demanding tone before bending and sucking her clit hard into his mouth, nipping it slightly with his teeth. The surprise hint of pain was all it took to finally push her over the edge. Her body felt as if she had just jumped off a large cliff, heart racing and breathless with anticipation all at the same time. Kimberly cried out with her orgasm, her pussy contracting almost painfully before shuddering as the wave washed over her.

Collapsing back against the cushioned ground, Kimberly sucked air in in an attempt to regulate her breathing. Slowly opening her eyes, Kimberly gazed at Nico still crouching between her thighs. If the state of his arousal were anything to go by, Kimberly wasn't the only person who had enjoyed their little encounter. His cock jutted from his tan body like a third limb. Hard and thick, it glistened with the evidence of his arousal. Without realizing it, Kimberly licked her lips much in imitation of how she wanted to lick his cock.

This was a dream right? Why shouldn't she live out all her naughty fantasies?

Nico followed her gaze down to his member and chuckled. "Like what you see, *Zingaro*?"

The heat from her embarrassment rose high in her cheeks. "If you've seen one, you've seen them all."

"Then let me do something to ensure I'll stand out in your memory." With a wicked smile, Nico grasped his cock tightly in his hand and slowly began to caress himself much to Kimberly's surprise.

He pumped his cock with sure, long strokes. She had never witnessed a man masturbating before. Hell, she was still shy about pleasuring herself, yet Nico seemed to have no such qualms. It was a wonder he was able to get his hand all the way around his thick shaft.

His measured caresses were slow and steady, causing Kimberly to bite her lip in order to silence her desire to urge him to move faster. She shifted restless from where she sat, her longing making her feel the need to move.

When Nico ran his thumb across the slick crown of his cock, Kimberly almost died. He was so unashamed in his arousal, in his thirst for pleasure.

Even as he squeezed his thick cock, Nico intently kept his gaze on her. It was almost as if he were sharing his pleasure with her. And pleasure it was. Kimberly's pussy trembled under his watchful gaze. It was almost impossible to believe but it was true, she was getting turned on again, just from watching Nico touch himself.

Yet she wanted to caress his cock, to move his hand out of the way so she could learn the feel of him for herself.

He was sexy.

He was hot.

Reaching toward him, she was shocked when she grasped at empty air, her arms sliding through him as if he were made of mist. Nico smiled down at her and pushed away from the ground. Confused, Kimberly sat up and reached toward him again.

"No, no, *Zingaro*, if you want me, you're going to have to wake up."

"But I like the dream," Kimberly complained petulantly.

Nico started to fade, becoming more and more translucent.

"No, wait, come back," she said, pushing up off the cool, soft grass.

"I am waiting for you, *Zingaro*, you just need to ask."

Struggling to stand, Kimberly fought with an invisible shield preventing her from going to him, and in the process she shook herself awake and looked down to find herself tangled in her sheets.

*Goddamn it.* Frustration filled her soul as she labored from under the mounds of blankets. For the first time in a long time, Kimberly felt close to something real and it had all been a dream. A passionate, exciting dream, but a dream nonetheless. It was worse than any of the nightmares ever were. Worse because it felt so right, as if his arms were the exact place she was meant to be. Groaning, she plopped back down on the bed, feeling frustration as she had never known before. Kimberly had to fight the urge to kick her feet against the bed in frustration.

"Why me?" she muttered aloud, punching her fist into her damp pillow. Sighing in disgust, she rolled over on her side and froze. A dark shadow loomed in front of her window. Thrusting her hand out, she flicked on the light beside her bed and stared in shock. Nico was standing outside her bedroom on the balcony.

\* \* \* \* \*

The light shining from the television gave the darkened room an eerie look. If it weren't for the familiar smell of the Pack and the wailing of Paula Cole blaring from the television, Nico might have been alarmed, but since he knew only one person who had the balls to invite herself into his home and touch his precious remote control, he reined in his temper and gave a slight smile. "What are you doing here?"

"Cable's out at my place."

Dropping his jacket over the arm of the easy chair, Nico walked around and sat next to his childhood friend and second-in-command Remington. Snatching the half-filled bowl of popcorn out of her lap, he slouched next to her and grimaced at the TV.

"And it will continue to be out until you pay the bill. Companies are really weird when it comes to getting paid." A snort was her only reply. "Do we have to watch this?"

"Yes."

"What's with you and teen TV? I think it's illegal to salivate over prepubescent boys once you reach a certain age."

Remy tossed a handful of kernels at him without turning from the show. "I'm not salivating. I'm researching."

"Researching what?"

"Human interaction."

Snorting, Nico shook his head. Anyone else he might have disbelieved, but when Remy said it, he knew it was fact, not fiction. If there was ever anyone who was the embodiment of the Lycan way, it was Remy. After her parents' deaths, she had been taken in by the Pack elders and raised completely void of human contact. She was the only one of them who never went to regular school and who took the Lycan Law to heart. She could recite it as well as a fourth grader could recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

"This isn't human interaction, it's television. Nothing's real on television. Do you think teenagers could really afford those clothes?"

"I'm not looking at their clothes." Turning, her dark eyes narrowed on his and she gave a slight sniff and frowned. "Where have you been? I've been waiting here for over an hour."

"For?"

"For my health," she commented snidely, grabbing the bowl back from him. "The impromptu meeting you called earlier today. You know, wandering Weres, the elders. Any of this ringing a bell?"

"Shit, I forgot." And he truly had. Blood was a requirement for the brain to work but all of his had rushed straight to his penis when he cornered Kimberly in the parking garage. The dream-walking took every last ounce of sanity right out of him. Just the thought of Kimberly spread before him as she had been in the dream was enough to get him hard. It had been agony to tear himself away when she awoke and saw him on her balcony. Especially since all he'd wanted to do was to burst into her room and take her right then. But he had promised her four days and he was a Were of honor.

Dream or no dream, their encounter had felt real to him. It was the first time Nico had ever used his channeling power for something so erotically charged and it had left him drained, yet still in need. Unlike Kimberly, Nico hadn't gotten off from their encounter and his balls were paying for it in spades. Shifting uncomfortably on the

couch, Nico resisted the urge to push on his aching erection. One odd move and Remy would be all over him with questions.

"What were you doing?"

"Nothing of importance."

Remy grabbed the remote control from the side of the couch and pointed it at the TV, muting the morose whining coming from the show. "Let me rephrase my question. Who is it?"

He wasn't going to get into this with her. There was no reason to lie or even to pretend the scent looming around him wasn't another Were. Remy was too smart and he respected her too much to even try, but then again, it wasn't her business who he was with so he didn't attempt to fill her in on his night. His situation with Kimberly was one of those things Remy just wouldn't understand, so there was no use in bothering.

"No one of importance."

"I'm afraid you're going to have to do better, *Benandanti*."

Turning to face her, Nico raised a brow. No matter who he was with, Remy should have known better. Friend or no friend, Nico didn't answer to anyone. "As your *Benandanti*, I don't have to explain anything to you, *Lupa*."

The words lay between them like an uncovered secret. In all their years of friendship, Nico had never lorded his position over Remy. It was never necessary. Standing up, Nico walked around the couch and turned on the light switch. He headed into his kitchen with Remy right on his trail.

"Pulling rank?" she asked from behind him.

Nico turned to her and looked in the face of his childhood friend. With skin as smooth and dark as chocolate, the stunning woman before him in no way resembled the homely and scrawny kid he first met when they were seven but just as their bodies changed so had their roles, and despite their friendship, he was first and foremost her Alpha. "If I have to."

"She must be very serious if I'm not allowed to question you."

"I don't answer to anyone, Remington, including you."

"Uh-oh, I'm in trouble now, you pulled out the full name." Instead of anger as he would have expected, Remy was smiling at him. Russet eyes twinkling, she crossed her arms over her ample breasts and leaned back against the wall. "She wouldn't happen to be the reason for this meeting tonight?"

"Assuming it's a girl?"

"Please." Remy's smile widened, showing off the canines she never bothered to hide. She was wolf all the time, whether in human form or not. "I can smell a Were in heat a mile away. Just as you can, it seems. Anybody I know?"

If anyone else heard their conversation, they might accuse Remy of being jealous, but Nico knew better. Remy no more had intimate feelings for him than he had for her,

but she took her job as *Venator* very seriously and never understood when to back down. It was one of the things that made her a great protector but at the same time, it made her a deadly adversary.

Nico refused to rise to the bait but sometimes being around people with heightened senses really blew. "No, now leave it be."

"You're going to have to come clean sometime. The Pack isn't going to take it too lightly if you try to bring in an outsider as your mate."

Raising a brow, Nico asked, "I'm sorry. Did I miss the part where the Pack picked and chose who I would fuck?"

"Fuck, no, mate with, yes, I guess you did."

"I'm sorry, but my mate is not an issue for discussion."

"Ah-ha, so she is your mate." Remy laughed gleefully. "When did you first know?"

Nico bit back the snappy retort, which was simmering on his tongue. Was Kimberly really his mate, as Remy seemed to think? It was a fact Weres could sense their true mates, spiritually and physically. If they were meant to be joined for life, the proof would be in the pudding, so to speak, once they made love. But in truth, he had been too concerned about finding out who Kimberly was and why she was alone, to think about something as trivial as mates.

Nico knew one thing though, whether they were mates or not, this was not a discussion he would have with anyone other than Kimberly. "All this sex talk is getting me riled. I don't need the whole Pack talking about my sex life. It's none of their business."

Remy made a clicking noise with her tongue and shook her head warily. "My job is to be your protector, remember? It's what I get paid the big bucks to do."

"I'm nobody's job, Remy."

"You're wrong, Sire, your safety is always my top concern." Remy's zealotry for her job was another bone of contention between them. His childhood friend had challenged and won the right to call herself his *Venator* and it wasn't a role she took lightly. He would have no other Were by his side in battle but his private life was a completely different thing.

Seeing his frown, Remy softened her voice as she continued with a smile, "And as your oldest friend, your safety isn't the only thing I worry about."

"The only person whose safety is in question right now is yours," Nico warned, taking a playful menacing step toward her. He knew her heart was in the right place.

Remy held her hands up in surrender. "Consider myself warned. But if you have any plans on attending this meeting, I suggest you shower first. If the wind blows the wrong way tonight, you might have a brawl on your hands."

"Trust me, that's what I'm trying to prevent."

\* \* \* \* \*

The heavy scent of alcohol and pheromones filled the air as Nico walked through the crowded bar. The Howler, a local Were hangout, was also the place Nico and his *Elitario* met. It had been their meeting ground since Nico's ascension, allowing him to be surrounded by his brethren as he guarded them from within.

The Howler wasn't one of those new, upscale bars that had popped up recently in Bayside. Those places were filled with lawyers and business types making deals and young professional singles looking to make a love connection. The Howler was what Nico liked to think of as an old-fashioned kind of bar. It didn't serve food, unless bar nuts counted, and it didn't serve any fancy drinks with cute names. The Howler had been around much longer than Nico and his *Elitario*. The bar was not only a local hangout but a safe haven for Weres during the Great War. Yet despite its noble history, now it was a place Weres went to get drunk.

Ryan, the bartender and part owner of The Howler, appeared bored as he mechanically cleaned glasses behind the bar. He only showed signs of life when Nico sent him an inconspicuous nod. With a replying nod of his own, Ryan stepped forward and discreetly pressed the button hidden under the cash register, unlocking the door to a private room near the back.

Moving through the packed room, Nico followed behind Remy, taking in everyone around them. Scents, familiar and unfamiliar, filled his head as he eyed the room. More and more of late, different breeds of Weres had begun moving into their territory and for the first time in a long time, it wasn't about war, it was about survival.

Stopping at the door, which resembled part of the wall, Remy pushed against the hidden entrance and walked inside. Stepping in slowly at first, she checked the room for any danger that might be directed toward Nico before stepping out of the way to let him enter. As Nico walked into the room, he eyed the crowded poker table amusedly.

His *Elitario*, which consisted of his top security officers as well as the head of the educational arm of the Pack, never missed an opportunity to have a good time, no matter what the circumstances. The Weres were as close to brothers as Nico would ever have. He trusted them with his life, just as they trusted him.

"So many Weres, so little time." Remy smiled, eyeing the group warmly.

"There's nothing but time." Kellen stood as was his custom when Remy came into the room. The slight blush, which stole over his face, was only noticeable due to the paleness of his skin, which contrasted with his bright red hair.

"Down, boy." Remy winked, pulling up a chair and bulldozing her way into the game. It was common knowledge amongst the Pack that Kellen had a thing for Remy, but he didn't stand a chance in hell with her. There was only room for one Alpha in a relationship and Kellen, as loyal as he was, would never stand up to Remy. She would walk all over him and hate him for it, and knowing Kellen, he would take it with a smile.

"Any particular reason we're running behind schedule?" Derek placed his cards in front of him. "Some of us have lives."

"Speak for yourself," Kellen kidded, retrieving his chair and sitting back down.

"Oh I was." Derek's dark eyes twinkled as he smiled. Everyone chuckled because they knew out of all of them, Derek was the one who had the most social life. The Asian Were attracted more women than a pocket full of money and he never failed to exploit his exotic looks to their full advantage.

Some elders of the Pack expressed concerns to Nico about how much time Derek spent with humans, but Remy wouldn't think of having anyone but Derek and Kellen as her *Rahu*, bodyguard warriors. Nico had always thought it was because she felt a kinship with the two men, who like her, grew up slightly alone.

Looking around the now crowded table, Harrison asked, "Does anyone notice every time we go out as a group, we always end up looking like the goddamn Were rainbow coalition?"

Harrison's wide smile spread across his dark face, tempering his sarcastic words. With his large frame and bulging biceps, he too could have been a *Rahu*, but his heart lay elsewhere as *Cahalith*, teacher for the young Weres. In order to live among the humans, they had to learn how to control their natural tendencies and it was Harrison's job to make sure they did.

Remy snickered at the comment and even Nico had to bite back a smile. The only thing they all had in common was they were Weres. They were all from mixed human nationalities but they were Were-DNA related where it counted. Their human ethnicity was as unimportant as the color of their fur. It was the one thing the Weres had managed to overcome their human brothers had not.

"Yeah, I have a dream, one which will get me out of here in twenty minutes or less," Derek quipped, looking at this watch.

"Wrong speaker, dip." Remy smirked.

"What, you learned that from TV?" Derek teased, ducking his head as Remy threw a poker chip at him.

"The longer you taunt her, the longer we're here," Kellen came to Remy's defense as usual, causing the other men to smile.

"Speaking of here, exactly why am I here?" Jackson leaned back in his chair, the only Were in the room wearing a suit and glasses. He didn't need the glasses, it was just a little camouflage he used to take the attention off his yellow-tinted eyes. "Although I relish being included with the cool kids, I have to say I am a little out of my element with this group. No one needs me to buy a kegger or purchase any porn."

Jackson was the historian for the Pack and normally he wasn't included when Nico called a meeting of the *Elitario*, however with the way things were going lately, Nico felt he needed as many Weres on his side as possible. He was going to ask his Pack to trust him as he took them in a new direction and he had a feeling there would be a lot of resistance, especially from the elders.

"I don't know." Remy sat back, contemplating Jackson with a gleam in her eye. "You seen anything good lately?"

Nico watched them all, amused. They were like a bunch of big kids, armed, dangerous, well-trained kids, but juveniles nevertheless. Their banter wasn't new, even in wolf form they jumped and butted each other like playful pups.

Harrison socked Jackson playfully in the arm. "Ahh, Jackson, you know we love you."

"Considered me charmed," Jackson dryly replied. "But what's the deal?"

"The deal is," Nico walked to the table and Kellen immediately stood, giving his chair to him, "we have the opportunity to bring forth change and the only real question is, should we."

The laughter, which had been brimming around the room before, suddenly disbursed and everyone turned their attention to Nico. "I've been contacted by the representatives of Santana, the Alpha from the Morbauch clan, about a treaty."

"Morbauch?" Jackson asked, surprise filling his tawny eyes. "But they're coyote."

"Very astute, Jackson." Sitting up, Remy raised questioning eyebrows to Nico's. "And you said?"

"Well, we're here discussing it."

"Not that I'm not honored you feel the need to bring us into your decision, *Benandanti*, but you don't really need our say."

"A fact I'm well aware of, but looking around this table, I can't help but recall something you said just a few minutes ago, Harrison." Gesturing to the group, Nico continued. "We have African Americans, Asians, Caucasians, Latinos all sitting together claiming the other as family, yet none of us resemble one another or are truly related besides the Were DNA coursing through our blood. After the territories were set and the clans separated, we all put physical appearance to the side and started our lineage over again. And despite the elders' best attempt at assuring our continuing bloodline, every year fewer and fewer of our Pack are born."

Nico paused, letting his words sink in. The knowledge his people were becoming extinct lived with him every day, especially knowing those who had the power to change it did nothing about it. Although he was the *Benandanti*, the *Maggiore* were the ones who made and governed over the Lycan Law. Of course they hadn't actually changed the law in decades, much to the detriment of them all. They were bitter Weres, still held up on the ways of the past, unable to see the need for change even when it was facing them head-on. The *Maggiore* were comprised of Pack elders, many of whom held grudges against all other Were animals who weren't wolves. They allowed their prejudices to eat at them and their elitism was destined to swallow them all whole.

The majority of the *Maggiore* fought in the Great War, which had taken many lives. No one in the Pack walked away unscathed. In fact, no one in any Pack, wolf or otherwise, escaped without some sort of loss to their Pack. Previously the Were animals had only fought small skirmishes for territory, but when a few Weres decided they wanted more, war broke out, leading to the worst devastation their kind had ever seen. Unfortunately it was a bloodbath that ended with no true winners. Instead, it led to

death and destruction more far-reaching than the Packs had ever realized. For some reason, their races were dying out and no one really knew the reason why. All they did know was the Packs were smaller every year and soon there would be no one to carry on the Were legacy.

This was why Nico's plan for survival was so important. "It's all a matter of genetics, boys. A half human, half Were mating with another half human, half Were has a fifty-fifty chance of conceiving a full human child."

"But what, half wolf, half coyote stands a better chance?" Derek questioned.

"Umm." Remy held up her hand, interjecting. "Am I the only one getting an image of cat-dogs in my head, because that's just nasty."

"The Were DNA is the common denominator, it's our shared beast. I've been telling you for years coyotes and wolves are compatible. In essence they are our long-distance cousins. We *can* mate with them. We just don't." Harrison sat back, templing his fingers as he spoke, ever the teacher.

Nico nodded his head. "Exactly, the possibility of extending both of our bloodlines is increased. Our chances are also increased if we mate with other Packs and take humans for mates."

"Humans." The surprise in Remy's voice was nothing compared to the looks on the faces around the table. "It has been strictly forbidden."

"It's a law, Remy, not a sacred oath."

"Are you suggesting we break the Law?" questioned Jackson, intrigued.

"No," Nico said firmly, looking around at everyone. "I'm suggesting we rewrite it."

## Chapter Three

The rash was getting worse. As were the many other heat-related elements wreaking havoc on her body. Just when Kimberly thought she could chalk everything Nico said up to lunacy, her body went all wacky and betrayed her. She was in heat. There was no doubt about it. The only real question was, what the hell was she going to do about it?

Nico's plans for her were as obvious as the crimson inflammation blooming under her blouse, but Kimberly wasn't ready to just drop to all fours for his sexual delight. She might be a Werewolf but she was a woman too. An independent woman who could figure this out on her own.

If only there were books about it.

Slipping behind her desk, five minutes later than she was supposed to, Kimberly sniffed the air, searching for any sign of Nico. She wasn't going to be surprised today or in her dreams anymore, if she had anything to say about.

"You're late." Kimberly jumped in her chair as Cassandra spoke. Damn it, so much for not being surprised.

"I know. I'm sorry. I couldn't sleep last night and then I overslept." Kimberly rubbed her hand over her eyes. "I'll stay late to make up the time."

"Don't worry about that shit, I'm worried about you. Is everything okay?" Cassandra spoke softly, intentionally keeping their conversation private.

Kimberly desperately wanted to confide in Cassandra. She felt so lonely sometimes, always having to guard her secret. It made it difficult to make friends because they inevitably sensed she was hiding something. And eventually, one by one, her friends would drift away.

Maybe she could just talk about the dream part, not so much about the Werewolf part. "I've been having these scary dreams of someone chasing me. Then last night it changed."

"Changed how?" Cassandra leaned in, engrossed.

"He wasn't chasing me this time, well, not really."

"Oooh, this sounds as if your dream turned sexy." Kimberly's cheeks flushed at Cassandra's words and the laughter that followed. "I'm right, aren't I? So, is it anyone I know?"

Kimberly didn't think she could blush any more, but with the heat upon her, she felt as if she were on fire. Looking around, she debated if she should mention Nico. It would be just her luck if he walked in right when she was talking. Thinking about it, she decided she just couldn't take the chance. "No, nobody you know."

Even to her own ears, she sounded as if she were lying. And Cassandra's face, animated and excited earlier, suddenly closed off. "Oh okay, sorry to pry."

"No, really, you weren't prying." Kimberly knew she should have never gone down this road. When would she ever learn? "I'm just a bit embarrassed."

"Embarrassed." Cassandra's eyes lit up at the word. "That must mean it's someone I know."

Looking down, Kimberly blushed harder. "Maybe."

"Oh it's definitely someone I know." Tapping her fingernail against her chin thoughtfully, Cassandra looked out her office door as if the phantom man would walk by. "It has to be someone worthy of the shame."

"I wouldn't say shame."

"Oh I know," Cassandra's voice rose with amusement. "It's the Swedish guy in the mailroom, isn't it? What's his name, Sven, Olaf—"

"Erik," Kimberly gasped in dismay. Was she kidding? "Good Lord, no."

Laughing now, Cassandra leaned against the desk holding her sides. "Can you imagine your kids? Bright red hair, taller than a tree..."

And with a tail. It wasn't a pretty picture.

"It wasn't Erik, all right, it was Nico."

Kimberly would prefer Cassandra know the truth than think she wanted Erik. The guy gave her the creeps, always leering at her. Something wasn't right with him and Kimberly seriously doubted it had anything to do with his home country.

"Nico, why in the world would you be embarrassed to have dreams of him? Hell, I'd be worried if you didn't." Cassandra wouldn't be so nonchalant if she knew what the dream was about.

The intercom on Kimberly's desk buzzed, startling them both. The receptionist's voice came across the speaker, "Ms. Brenin, you have a visitor at the reception desk."

"Oh my God, wouldn't it be funny if it were Nico?" Kimberly knew Cassandra was only joking but she was shaking in her shoes. What if it was Nico? Dear God, she wasn't so sure she was ready to face him just yet.

"Well, go on, find out who your visitor is." Cassandra pulled her from her desk and pushed her toward the door. Kimberly walked toward the receptionist as if she were heading for her final supper before execution.

Reaching the reception desk, she looked around in surprise. No one was there except Milla, the receptionist. "Where's my visitor?"

"Oh he must have decided to use the restroom." Okay, definitely a male. And since she didn't know many men, it narrowed the field considerably. "Oh there he is." Milla didn't have to finish the sentence for Kimberly to know whom she was talking about.

A familiar scent assailed her senses. Turning, she stared into hazel eyes, which were a mirror image of her own. Suppressing the growl rising in her throat, she took a step forward. "David, what are you doing here?"

"I figured you couldn't hang up on me if I was standing right in front of you."

"Lover's spat?" Milla was the office gossip and Kimberly knew she better get David out of there before the conversation went any further. Grabbing his arm, she pulled him into the nearest available conference room.

"How dare you come to my job? I can't believe you would do this. I am not your baby sister anymore, David. I don't need you to take care of me, okay?" Kimberly blanched as soon as the words left her mouth. Why was she always saying the wrong thing? She had a terrible habit of letting her temper get ahead of her brain and then hurting the ones she loved.

"You may not need me to take care of you but I needed to talk to you, damn it. If you're so grown up, act like it." Kimberly bristled at his words but acknowledged the truth behind them.

"I think I already know what you're going to tell me. I'm in heat, right?"

For once Kimberly had surprised her brother. "What's happened?"

Of course he would know something had happened. He wasn't an idiot. The honor was reserved just for her it seemed. Deciding to change the subject back to him, Kimberly went on the offensive.

"Why didn't you tell me about this? I was totally unprepared."

David sighed and grabbed the nearest chair. Sitting, he looked at her before replying, "I know I should have, especially after you moved away from home. I kept thinking I could wait for the right time. But the right time never came."

Kimberly grabbed his hands in hers and sat next to him. "But, David, why didn't you tell me earlier? I don't understand."

"Kimmie..." Kimberly winced at the nickname and David quickly continued. "I was nineteen and raising my younger sister. It's not as if I knew a lot about female Werewolves. We weren't raised as Weres and Mom and Dad didn't prepare me. They had no idea they were going to be killed in a car accident. I just muddled along the best I could with the information I had. And I didn't want to talk to you about going into heat cause no brother wants to think about his sister in a sexual context, okay."

"It's not okay, David, because I'm not just your sister, I'm a Were—"

"Wait." David growled, jumping to his feet. Moving quickly in front of Kimberly, David faced the closed door as if death itself were on the other side.

"What's wrong?" Kimberly whispered, trying to grasp at the scent but unable to smell anything over David's raging pheromones.

"Someone's out there listening. I smell a Were." The door opened as the words left David's mouth and Kimberly had to put all her might into holding him back.

"Well, at least I can say his scent ability is better than his fatherhood ability." Nico stood in the doorway, an amused look on his face. His stance was the polar opposite of David's, who looked ready to spring into action. "You must be the brother."

"And who might you be?" The energy in the air was electrifying.

The hairs on Kimberly's arms began to rise as her wolf began to respond to her brother's anger. A low whimper slipped from her lips as she gripped him tighter, trying to prevent the bloodbath Nico seemed to be instigating.

"It's just Nico, David."

Nico laid his hand over his heart mockingly. "Just? You injury me, *Zingaro*."

Strolling through the door, Nico firmly shut it behind him before making his way across the room and coming to a stop where they were standing. His outward appearance was one of a man without a care in the world, but his penetrating gaze told another tale.

"I'll do more than injure you if you don't identify yourself," David growled.

"Of course." Nico bowed his head slightly. "I'm Nicodemus Cassamonti, *Benandanti* of the Brachyurus and your sister's mate."

"What?" David uttered the words the second Kimberly gasped, "He is not."

"Okay, future mate. Details, details."

"Over my dead body." Kimberly could practically see David's hackles rising. Oh this was so not good.

"Easily arranged."

Nico's easygoing reply rankled Kimberly. "How dare you threaten my brother?"

"*Zingaro*, I do not threaten." His voice was warm but the words were measured and obviously not for her benefit.

"Kimberly, I don't need you to try and protect me." Addressing Nico, David bowed his head slightly in respect but he didn't lower his eyes to Nico. "*Benandanti*, I was unaware there was a clan in this area. My sister and I will leave your territory as soon as we are able."

"We will not," Kimberly shouted then clasped her hand over her mouth as both males turned to stare at her.

Nico looked amused while David looked pained. "No need to shout, *Zingaro*, you are correct. You will be going nowhere."

"You're being a bit presumptuous, aren't you?"

"Not at all. It is only natural my mate and I would live together."

"I am not your mate."

"Sorry to interrupt your little tête-à-tête, but this conversation is moot." David stepped between the two of them. "You are not my sister's mate and we *are* leaving town."

As Kimberly sputtered, Nico stepped forward, nose to nose with David. "I understand your need to protect your sister, although I doubt your ability to do so. But you are woefully uneducated about the ways of the Were."

David flushed with embarrassment at Nico's words but he didn't back down. "Maybe, but don't think I'll let some stranger who claims to be the *Benandanti* take my sister for a mate without a fight."

Kimberly had just about had enough. "Okay, guys, I don't know if either of you realize it but I am over twenty-one and I don't have to listen to either one of you. So there." Swinging open the door, she stalked out of the conference room and back toward her office. If the two of them wanted to have a pissing match, it was fine with her, but she wasn't going to stand there while her shoes got wet.

"Hey," Milla called over in a stage whisper. "What's going on?"

As if she would confide in the little gossip hound. "Family stuff."

Fucked-up werewolf family stuff, but family stuff nonetheless.

"Kimmie, get back here," David called from behind her.

Cringing, Kimberly refused to obey. She was past the stage where she listened to everything her brother told her to do. Resisting the childish urge to flip him the finger, Kimberly continued to her office, slamming the door once she passed through it.

The loud echoing of the door drew Cassandra from her office with an irritated expression marring her brow. "Erik?"

"No, worse. My brother."

"Kimberly, we're not through."

Spinning around, Kimberly faced David, angry as she had ever been with him. "This is my place of work," she growled.

"Kimberly, calm down." David's eyes were wide with fear.

Kimberly didn't need a mirror to know why. The change was coming over her, brought on by lack of sleeping and rising anger. Huffing, she tried to calm herself but she could feel her control slipping.

David grabbed her arms. "Fight it, Kim."

"Should I call security?" The fear in Cassandra's voice speared on Kimberly's beast.

"No." Her voice was becoming lower as she gripped her brother, trying to hold on with all her might. *Calm down, Kimberly. Get yourself together.* "I need to—"

"We need to use your office," Nico spoke as he came into the room. Without waiting for Cassandra's go-ahead, he grabbed Kimberly's hand and ushered her past the stunned woman.

"I'll come too."

Pushing Kimberly into the room, Nico turned on David, his anger raging. "Don't you think you've done enough?"

Nico slammed the door and locked it before Kimberly knew what was going on. Dragging her onto his lap, he lulled her with low purrs, stroking her tingling flesh. "Redirect the energy, Kimberly. You can fight the change."

Kimberly shook with the force of trying to control the beast. The only way she could describe it was the endorphins she experienced while exercising. She was reaching for the high only the beast could give her, but at the same time, she knew she didn't want to change in the middle of her boss's office.

Nico swore before she turned her head toward him. "Concentrate on me, Kimberly, only me." Bending his head, he licked at the seam of her lips, coaxing them open so he could slip his tongue inside. Kimberly moaned at the touch of his lips and feathered her fingers along his jaw.

His hand slid into the V of her blouse, his fingers moving in small circles around her aroused areolas. Kimberly's nipples tightened in response, heat pulling at her core as they stood, begging for his touch. She cried out in a mingle of pleasure and pain as his fingers pulled on her taut nipple. The heat inside her rose as the fire between her legs blazed hotter.

"Easy, *Zingaro*. I'm here for you." Nico's whispered words only made Kimberly more frantic. She shifted her legs restlessly, wordlessly begging for his touch.

Nico shifted her on his lap until she was sitting with her back pressed against him. Pulling her skirt up, he exposed her thigh-high hose. Kimberly could feel her beast pushing at her defenses, fighting to be free. But it was warring with her sexual energy.

Nico was whispering soft words in her ear but Kimberly could only hear his soothing tone. She pushed the beast back, concentrating on the sensations Nico was evoking. His hands slid inside her panties, pushing aside the restricting material. The cool air fired her senses, making her realize how exposed she was. The funny thing was, she didn't care. Kimberly just wanted his touch.

It took just the glide of his fingers against her engorged clit before Kimberly was coming, moaning his name. She gyrated on his lap as she dug her nails into his forearm. The fire in her body seemed to bank as her orgasm came to an end. She was tired, doused with sweat, but her beast was at bay.

This was so much better than the dream. Touching his warm, rough skin was heavenly. She wanted more but his clothes were in the way. Kimberly tore at his shirt, trying to find the buttons.

"Calm down, baby, it's okay." Nico ran his hands over her back, trying to soothe her fever.

Kimberly pulled at the knot in his tie, loosening it before Nico grabbed her hands, halting her motions. She stared at him, her heart racing. All she wanted was to touch him, learn his body, and she didn't understand why he was trying to stop her. "Kimberly, baby, much as I would love your sweet little hands on me, I don't think it's such a good idea."

Kimberly shook her head as if coming out of a dream. She realized Nico had distracted her with his kiss and the energy of her beast had been transformed into sexual heat. For the second time today, Kimberly could feel her cheeks burn with embarrassment. "Let me go, please." She struggled to get off his lap but froze as she realized her movements were rubbing her ass along his hardened cock. He probably thought she was some kind of slut the way she had attacked him.

"Now don't get all uptight on me now," Nico teased. "You were doing just fine."

Kimberly tilted her head back to look into Nico's eyes. His voice may have sounded amused but there was still lust shining in his eyes. And for the life of her, even though she didn't know why, she was proud. But she wasn't going to let him know. "Can you please let me go?"

Nico sighed before releasing her. "We need to talk, *Zingaro*, your deadline is looming ever closer."

"I know how to count," she grumbled, not willing to let him have the final say.

"And I know how to subtract, but the sooner you give in to me —"

"The sooner you'll go away."

"It will never happen, *Lupa*. Wolves mate for life."

"Insanity is for life too but you don't see people advertising the merits of it."

Chuckling, Nico stood. "You amuse me."

"Lucky me." Straightening her appearance, Kimberly tried to think of what she was going to say to Cassandra. Only God knew what her boss was thinking. "I've got to get back to work."

"You can run, *Zingaro*, but I will always find you. You're mine and I can't wait to tame you."

"In your dreams."

"No, my love, in yours."

\* \* \* \* \*

Before Nico was out of the parking garage of Lewis and Sinclair, he'd already put the wolves on alert to stay close to Kimberly and her brother. He had almost lost his legendary cool when he'd seen them together in the conference room and if it weren't for the family resemblance, he would have torn David's hide to shreds for touching his woman. The exact moment when Kimberly became his wasn't quite clear in his mind, but for all intents and purposes she was his and Nico would have no other scent on her except for his own.

Turning into the parking lot of The Desert Sanctuary, Nico frowned as he spotted the elders' cars. The last thing he wanted to deal with right now was Pack bullshit he was sure they came to dish out. The *Maggiore* had a hard time letting go of the past and it was one of the reasons his Pack was in so much danger of becoming extinct. The old

ways weren't working, but trying to convince them was about as easy as convincing Kimberly she was his.

His pack, the *Brachyurus*, was comprised of nearly all the Werewolves in the Southwestern states. There were many Packs all over the United States as well as the world, but Nico only concerned himself with that of his clan, which was made up from several different lineages that joined together after the Great War. They, like all clans, were self-sufficient with their own government and laws. Although most Were Law was the same, it was still left up to the individual ruling council to set and maintain them, which meant Nico had the right to veto and instate, within reason, any credo he felt necessary, much to the *Maggorie's* dismay.

Nico knew it had to be hard for the aging Weres to accept a younger leader as their Alpha, but unless the men had a way to go back in time, they'd better get used to it. Weres lived a long time, much longer than their human counterparts, and it wasn't unheard of for someone to reach their ninetieth year looking as fit as a man in his forties. Yet their longevity was a blessing and a curse, because the ones who lived the longest remembered the ways of the past, and they were reluctant to accept change, no matter what form it came in.

As he got out of his car, Nico spotted Remy lingering in the doorway. Her dark face was lined with worry and her frame taut with tension. When she saw him, Remy quickly headed down the stairs, trying to waylay him.

"We need to talk." The seriousness of her voice gave him pause more than her words.

Looking past her at the closed door, Nico frowned. "Who?"

Nico didn't have to say more, Remy was quick to understand the question. "I have no idea. All I know is, they know."

"And I'm assuming from your expression, they're not pleased."

"Are you surprised? You're trying to change our doctrine. It's the only thing they know."

"Change is a long time coming." To quote Kimberly, this wasn't a *goddamn democracy*. Nico had earned his right to lead his Pack and he would take them in the direction he chose. Their survival was at stake and he wasn't willing to sit back and do nothing to please a bunch of old men.

"You can't change them overnight, Nico."

"No, but I can change our future." Starting around her, Nico stopped suddenly and turned back to face his childhood friend. "There can only be one way, Remy. Mine or theirs. Where do you stand?"

Remy growled low in her throat, shooting him a stare he'd only seen on her face in battle. "Do I rip you a new asshole for questioning my loyalty now or later?"

Chuckling, Nico held his hands in mock surrender. "I had to ask."

"You never have to ask. I'll follow you to the end."

Nico knew, even if Remy had doubts, once she had given her word to have his back, he knew he would never need to worry. Now he needed to find out who his betrayer was.

The *Brachyurus* Pack chose The Desert Sanctuary as its official meeting place. After the Great War, it served as a haven for those pups who'd lost their parents. It had also acted as the first neutral meeting grounds for the different Packs. It was now a legalized animal shelter the Pack ran and organized, helping Weres all over the world. As the *Benandanti*, Nico acted as the president, overseeing all the ins and outs, and it was also where the *Maggiore* met for council meetings.

Walking into the building, Nico tried to evaluate each of the members of the *Elitario*. Even though they all seemed shocked by the idea of working with the other Weres, none of them had seemed too upset, once he explained his reasoning. However, someone was very good at hiding his true feelings since he knew the information from their meetings had reached the ears of the *Maggiore*. If he wanted to remain *Benandanti* and alive, Nico knew he couldn't wait too long to discover the culprit.

As he prepared to confront the *Maggiore*, Nico schooled his face into the emotionless mask that had served him so well in the past. He flung open the door to the observation room and all conversation immediately ceased.

Their reaction was no more than he expected. The taupe conference room was brimming with tension, seven men turning to look at Nico as he entered. Flanking the large marble table, each man represented a descendant of the regional Were leaders of the past, bringing with them several generations of traditions and ways, long forgotten in the Were youth of the day.

He was in essence the Commander in Chief to their Congress. Of course their situation wasn't as formal since the *Maggiore* obtained their positions through descendants from families of power instead of votes from the people. Nico respected them and their opinion equally but he didn't have time for their bullshit.

"So, do the *Maggiore* now meet without their Pack leader in attendance?" Nico walked into the room, Remy following closely behind him.

"*Benandanti*, glad you made it. There are some disturbing rumors we were hoping you could address."

"Rumors, really? Do tell." Nico walked around to the head of the table to take his place, glad to see no one had the audacity to sit in his chair at least.

"Ah well, we have heard, through reliable sources, you plan to contact...coyotes." The last was stated with disgust.

"Oh it's no rumor." Nico glanced around the room as he spoke, noting the reactions of the elders. "I have already contacted the Morbauch clan and have arranged a meeting with their Pack leader."

The gasps around the room were audible.

Immediately the room erupted with numerous voices, but one outraged shout in particular stood out. "You dare?"

Dare. He dared for the sake of his people. "I have contacted them and I will meet with them. This is not an issue for discussion."

"Nico, you cannot be serious. You disgrace us with just the idea of meeting with those vermin." Keith Laine, an elder from the *Roda* line, rose to his feet in outrage. "This is not a decision you can just make on your own!"

Nico looked at the elders with disgust. They wanted to be part of the process but they truly were just a hindrance to progress. Although they'd had this discussion many times in the past, he tried again to make them understand. "It is no disgrace to want to save our Pack. You all know the problems we have been experiencing, even if you want to bury your heads in the sand. Every year our numbers dwindle while you sit here like a bunch of old women wringing your hands in despair. We have the ability to save ourselves. I plan to do just that."

Everyone spoke at once, their voices mingling together to form one large roar of rage. Remy moved from her seat to his left, to stand directly behind him, presenting a show of force, which silenced some of the members. "Remington, you can't rightly agree with him?" Clarkson Vera from the *Cetyl* line was one of the most outspoken of the *Maggiore*. His outrage shined brighter than his auburn hair, which was receding with age. "You of all people know how important the Lycan Laws are."

"I follow our *Benandanti* in all things."

Eyes of fury faced Nico from Franklin Russell of the *Polda* line, the Were who had taken Remy into his home when she was just a child. Nico knew, out of all the *Maggiore*, he would be the one who felt the most betrayed by Nico's plan. Franklin, along with several of the Weres in the room, was a founding father of the bylaws and codes they lived by today. He was a smart man but not a strong Were, and it had always been his downfall. He could never rule and he hated anyone who could.

"This is a disgrace. The council will never abide by this."

"According to the laws you've established, *Maggiore*, they don't have to." Remy's words did something Nico had been unable to do. It silenced the room.

No one could deny the truth of Remy's words. The power given to the *Benandanti* by the very men in the room was coming back to bite them in the ass. Nico smiled at the irony of it all. It was poetic justice.

"I've extended a *Pax Pacis* to Santana and I have every right to believe he will accept my offer of truce. We don't need to continue to die to prove we are superior. It's a futile battle in itself. The only thing in a hundred years we've managed to do was to prove we're expendable and I will not have the blood of our youth on my hands so you can have pissing rights."

Looking around the room slowly, Nico let his words sink in. "No longer will my Pack be ruled by egos."

"Only for as long as you rule." Franklin spoke quietly, but with a room full of Werewolves, it wasn't likely anyone hadn't heard him. Nico knew whoever was plotting against him had Franklin in their corner. He only retained leadership of the

Pack as long as he remained the Alpha. Anyone could challenge him at any time for the right.

"This will never work." All eyes turned to Heath, one of the oldest Weres of the Pack.

"And why not, pray tell?" Remy jumped in on Nico's behalf.

"Because, it is a show of weakness to the other Weres, and none of their Packs will be any more willing than we are."

"I think you're wrong." Nico couldn't believe they were actually letting him talk about his plans for a truce when in the past they had always refused to have the conversation. Their resistance to it was one of the reasons he had gone ahead without their input. "The other Weres are in a worse situation than we are. Their numbers have been decimating for decades, they're on the brink of extinction and they were open to our discussion of a meeting."

"Probably only to discover our weaknesses." Nico was convinced Franklin was the most negative Were he had ever met. It was a shock Remy turned out as well as she did.

"We aren't exactly opening our doors and inviting them into our homes. I plan to take precautions."

Heath nodded his head, full with snowy white hair. "It is good you are being cautious, Nico. I was afraid you had forgotten all the lessons of the past."

Nico was pleased Heath wasn't totally against him. He was one of the elders Nico admired, a mentor of sorts when Nico was moving up the ranks. Nico looked into his eyes and knew although it initially sounded as if he were against the plan, Heath was really giving Nico the opportunity to argue his case.

"We cannot continue to hold grudges to the detriment of our own Pack."

"You will be the downfall of us all." Franklin stood and stormed out of the room.

"*Maggiore*, I tell you this is the road to our survival. Give me the chance to prove it to you."

"You'll get your chance to prove it, let's just hope it doesn't ruin us all." Clarkson pushed back away from the table and followed Franklin out of the room.

One by one the elders rose, exiting the room quietly until only Heath remained. Standing, he walked toward Nico and Remy, pausing when he was in front of them. "You know they will never stand for a treaty. Are you prepared for the fallout?" Unfortunately Heath wasn't saying anything Nico didn't already know.

"Can you truly ever be prepared for dissension amongst the ranks?"

A small smile flitted across Heath's face before he patted Nico on the shoulder. "I hope you know what you're doing, son."

Nico watched in silence as the last elder left the room.

"Well, that went well." Remy dropped back into her seat.

"Better than my ascension ceremony." Nico's dry comment made Remy laugh as intended. In all actuality, it had gone better than he expected, but it also happened sooner than he expected. "So, looks as if we have a mole."

"Yes it does."

"Any ideas?"

Leaning back in her chair, Remy kicked her feet back on the table, crossing her arms over her stomach. "I have a hard time believing anyone would betray you."

"Believe it or not, someone did."

"Jackson, of course, would be the first suspect, seeing as how he's the new guy and all."

"Well, let's get someone on him."

"It might be kind of hard to do."

"Why?"

"Because you have them all tied up with your love life." Remy shot him an amused look.

"Remy –"

"You have got to learn to take a shower. I don't even know this *Lupa* and her scent is beginning to make me horny."

"If you concentrated on your own sex life instead of mine, this wouldn't be an issue."

"So you have a sex life now?" she teased, standing and stretching her arms above her head.

"Not yet, but now that I am done with this council mess, maybe I can get back to seeing about my little problem."

"Awww, it's little? I see now why you haven't had a sex life." Remy danced away from him before he could make her pay for her words.

"I am going to ignore your comment for the moment since I need you, but just wait. Paybacks are a bitch."

"I'm sorry to interrupt, *Benandanti*, but I have a message for you."

"Thank you, you can go." Nico dismissed the Were as he slit open the manila envelope.

"Anything good?" Remy was the best second-in-command around, but she was also extremely nosy and always wanted to know what was going on.

Nico read the missive with interest before answering her query.

"Yes, actually, something very interesting. It seems Kimberly and her brother David were raised by a mated pair of Weres who left the Pack after the Great War."

"That was kind of quick news."

"Yes, it seems as if someone recognized the family name and after a quick review of the history was able to come up with a brief account for me."

"Why did they leave the Pack?"

"That part isn't quite as clear, but it may have something to do with our friends, the *Maggiore*."

"Man, they do get around, don't they?"

"Yes, and I don't want their involvement to ruin what I'm trying to accomplish with Kimberly."

"You're going to have to present her to them eventually, especially if she truly is your mate."

"You're right of course, but I hate to expose her to them before she even knows what being a Pack Were is like, let alone the mate of the *Benandanti*."

"What exactly are you trying to accomplish?"

"I need to convince her that her heat won't abate without me."

"You're working awful hard just to get some trim."

Nico stood, bristling with anger. "Don't *ever* talk about her with such disrespect."

Instead of retorting back with an angry comment of her own, Remy seemed to brim with amusement. "You are so gone. This isn't just a sex thing, she's the one, isn't she?"

Nico sat back down, his anger dissipated. "Perhaps. I will know for sure when she stops being so obstinate."

"When she stops or when you stop. You're like a dog with a bone, pardon the pun, and if she were just another pretty tail, we wouldn't even be having a conversation."

Nico contemplated her words, knowing she was right. He would never be this tied up in knots if Kimberly weren't truly his mate. Although difficult to admit, she had gotten under his skin as no one else and he enjoyed it.

"Come on, lover boy, enough mooning over your mate. Why don't you go run for a bit and get her smell off you," Remy advised. "You haven't been out in a while and should probably make your presence known, know what I mean?" Remy glanced at the closed door the *Maggiore* had recently left.

"Probably a good idea." Nico knew if he went to Kimberly now, in his current state of mind, with the agitation of the day beating at him, his beast would take over and he would lose the control he was barely holding on to. Going for a run would allow him to exert some of his energy before he saw her.

"Let's go." The best part of having their meetings at The Sanctuary was it was the perfect place to run after a heated discussion. They owned approximately a thousand acres of land, enough so the Pack could run to its hearts' content.

Heading outside, Nico sniffed the evening air. The beast in him yearned to run free, to be released after the tension of the meeting. Impatient to join the other Weres already running with the night, Nico shed his clothing and with the image of the wolf in his

head, he instantly shifted to his natural form. Sitting on his haunches, Nico glanced over at Remy who had also changed. She was slightly smaller than the average male wolf and her coat was an almost silvery gray.

*Let's run.* Taking off, Nico headed out across the open plain, already scenting the other wolves. Heading in their general direction, he heard Remy sprinting closely behind him.

Their run was as fluid as the wind. Passing through brush, jumping over limbs, it was the most natural feeling in the world for Nico. He was one with the earth. He was a son of nature. He was free. It wasn't long before the other wolves running the land joined Remy and him. Not all of them were Were, but they all were family.

Nipping at his heel, Remy toyed with him. Running with one another, butting noses into hides, they played as carefree as pups, pinning one another to the ground. Tackling Remy in midair, Nico held her to the ground by the fur on the back of her neck. Giving her a playful shake he released her, but not before yapping at her to follow. They ran until the sky darkened and the air grew chilled, dodging each other through the brisk night air.

Time was irrelevant as they played, but soon another need began to fill Nico that had little to do with games. Trotting to a small lake, which was hiding by a dense brush of trees, Nico lay on the ground. Slowing his breathing, he began to rise, his fur receding inside as his male form began to take place. It only took a matter of seconds for him to return to his human state but already he missed his connection to the land.

Soft fur brushed against his bare legs as Remy came to stand by his side. Reaching down, he caressed his friend's flank. "Stay and enjoy the night," he murmured when she started to whine. "It's bedtime for little Weres."

Or one Were in particular whom Nico couldn't wait to see again. The run had cooled his hunger but nothing would sate the desire he felt for Kimberly.

## Chapter Four

The sound of running water did little to calm Kimberly's already fried nerves. She'd had some bad days at work before but today was really going to take the cake. Her boss was watching her as if she were a freak, which by being a Werewolf, she might actually qualify as one. And everyone at the office was talking about her.

Milla, the little bitch, had run off and told everyone Kimberly had two men fighting over her and one of them was Nico. It wasn't true of course, but Kimberly knew it wouldn't be long before the head honchos stopped by and had a little talk with her. She was so fired. Fired and in heat. A condition she couldn't deny anymore, even if she wanted to. Really, Nico was hot and everything, but under normal circumstances she wouldn't have ever dreamed of humping his leg in her boss's office. It was taking the whole "bitch in heat" thing a bit too far, even for her.

After adding bubbles to her rising bath water, Kimberly began to undress. If there was ever an evening for Calgon to take her away, it was tonight. Hopefully, the soothing suds would calm her ragged nerves and ease the ever-present ache from between her legs. Arousal wasn't supposed to hurt this bad. It wasn't supposed to be a constant, incurable ache that had her seething for a man she hardly knew. And yet, here she was, wet from her own desire and quickly running out of excuses for not taking Nico up on his offer.

The knocking on her bathroom door roused Kimberly from her musings. Leaning over the tub, Kimberly shut the running water off.

"Kimmie, ahh, Kimberly, you okay in there?" David sounded worried. She ought to make him suffer some more but she just didn't have the energy right now.

"I'm fine, David, really." Kimberly dipped her toes into the water to test the temperature.

"Are you sure you don't want me to stay?" David had wanted to stick around town for a few days, but instead of staying with her, Kimberly had asked him to get a hotel. One of the reasons she had only rented a one-bedroom apartment was to avoid houseguests. Plus, she really didn't feel up to a bunch of questions and confrontations right now.

"Yeah, I think it's best, don't you? As soon as I'm done here, I am off to bed."

David sighed heavily before replying. "Let's get together and have brunch tomorrow, okay?"

Kimberly knew it was only a matter of time before they had the big confrontation they avoided this afternoon. Might as well make it tomorrow. "Okay, sounds good."

"I'll lock up when I leave." David walked away from the bathroom and a few minutes later Kimberly heard the front door shut.

Slipping into the warm bath, she stifled the urge to moan aloud at the soothing sensation of water caressing her heated flesh. As she sank lower in the oversized tub, Kimberly surrounded herself with the bubbles until only her head was exposed. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to drift off.

If she could have breathed underwater, she would have sank deeper. Kimberly just wanted to disappear into the bubbly goodness of the water. The heat soaked into her tired muscles, soothing her aching joints. The almost change today had taken a toll on her body. After work, David insisted they go for a run but so far Kimberly hadn't found a place safe enough to change. Her beast was running her ragged. Kimberly needed to change and she knew it.

Of course she also needed to relieve some of the sexual tension she was experiencing before she started to hump the furniture. *That would make her really popular with the people she worked with.*

Slipping her hands over her soap-slicked body, Kimberly caressed her breasts, cupping them in her hands. Kimberly felt a warm sensation traveling throughout her body and the smell of the Pack surrounding her. Scents, familiar and strong, began to cloud her senses as she felt a calling from within.

*"Come out and play."*

Startled, Kimberly sat up, splashing water everywhere. It was Nico's voice. But how was this possible? She was awake, wasn't she?

*"Are you?"*

Kimberly wondered if she were going crazy or if he was reading her thoughts. She knew he wasn't there, not really, but she could still sense him, as if there were a connection between them. Maybe she really was dreaming. Dreaming of Nico wanting her wasn't such a bad thing to think about when she was alone, naked and wet.

Kimberly again cupped her breasts, flicking her thumbs across the nipples, bringing them to life.

*"That's right, baby, touch yourself for me."*

Kimberly wasn't as surprised this time by the voice. It was a bit disconcerting to have someone inside her head, knowing what she was doing. Of course it was also a bit naughty, almost as if she knew she was being watched but didn't care.

*"Do you enjoy it when a woman touches herself?"* Kimberly felt odd speaking to someone in her head, even if she were dreaming.

Nico chuckled. *"I like anything you do to yourself."*

*"Big shocker you're into watching. The closest you'll ever get to seeing it is in my dreams."*

*"Do you really still think you're dreaming?"* Nico sounded affronted she would dare to talk back to him.

Kimberly froze. Opening her eyes, she quickly released her breasts and grabbed for a towel.

*"Awww..."* Nico's voice was filled with humor. *"Just when you were getting to the good part."*

"Pervert," she said, but this time out loud. "I'm awake, aren't I?"

*"I've been trying to tell you all along, Zingaro, don't get mad at me because you didn't catch on before you began your little show."*

Good God, was she going mad?

*"No, you're as sane as —"*

"Stop doing that."

Nico's chuckle resounded in her head. *"Doing what?"*

Dragging the wet towel around her body, Kimberly climbed out of the tub. She didn't know how Nico was doing what he was, but she wasn't going to give him more of a show than she had to. "You're beginning to freak me out. Where are you?"

*"I'm closer than you might think."*

"How close?"

*"I'm outside your door."*

Turning, Kimberly grasped her towel to her chest, trying to calm the beating of her heart. She could sense him. He was near. Pulse pounding, she walked slowly to the bathroom door. Nervously she gripped the handle and pulled the door open quickly, hoping to surprise Nico on the other side, but the surprise was on her. He wasn't there.

"Liar."

*"I never said which door, Zingaro."*

"You are a menace."

*"I'm your mate."*

"I think the two words might be synonymous."

*"Let me in, Zingaro. I will ease your pain."*

"You are my pain." Shaking her head, Kimberly walked the few steps to her bedroom to get dressed.

Pausing in the doorway, Kimberly looked over her shoulder toward the front door. Nico's scent was rampant in the air. He was there.

"I'm not going to invite you in."

*"I'm not a vampire. I don't need an invitation."*

His comment brought her up short. "Are there vampires?"

*"There are many things that go bump in the night. I'm one of them, as are you."*

Tossing the towel on the floor, Kimberly grabbed her nightshirt and slid it over her damp body. Stalking to the front door Kimberly wrenched it open, glaring at Nico lounging against the jamb.

"I can't believe you can do this."

"Really, I thought you would have discovered by now I am capable of doing all types of things." Nico stepped through the door, pushing Kimberly back so he could close it.

"You must be the most arrogant, pigheaded man around."

"It's not an arrogant thing, it's a mate thing. It's just one more reason I know we're meant to be together. Only mates can communicate through telepathy."

"You're lying."

"You wish I were, mate."

Kimberly wanted to scream. He was just so infuriating. As far as she knew, he could be pulling the mate shit out of his ass.

"You know what, it doesn't even matter. The point is you have no right to barge in here!" Kimberly poked him with her finger to emphasize her point. "And how dare you intrude during my bath? That was private, damn it!"

Nico laughed at her bravado and Kimberly narrowed her eyes. He wasn't taking her seriously. "Yes, I am, *Zingaro*, I take you very seriously."

"Stop answering my thoughts. In fact, stop reading my thoughts. It's really starting to piss me off."

"Too bad, *Zingaro*. As your mate, my first priority is to please you. I can do no less. And since you do not talk to me, I have taken it upon myself to find out what your needs are by any means I have. If it means reading your thoughts, so be it." Nico reached out and stroked her arm, putting her off balance. It wasn't fair he was all concerned and loving when she wanted to be mad.

"I am not your mate so you can stop that shit right now." Kimberly decided to go on the defensive and maybe she could stop thinking about how she really wanted to throw herself into his arms. Before the thoughts had barely formed, Kimberly was groaning to herself. He probably was still reading her mind and just heard everything she had thought.

Nico pulled her in close, tilting his head toward her. "Yes I did, mate. And I must admit I am pleased you want me as much as I want you. Even if you have decided to fight it."

"I think it's an invasion of privacy and rude."

"I'll stop if you promise to stop hiding from me." He dropped a quick kiss on the tip of her nose. "But I do say I will miss it. You have the most amazing fantasies. Vivid with details and imagery."

"Oh my God. You should be stuffed and hung on a wall."

"But then you'll miss me."

"I'll adapt," she grumbled, her irritation fading. Damn it, even when she wanted to stay mad at him she couldn't. Her body wouldn't let her. Just standing next to him had caused the havoc in her body to return.

Kimberly felt as if she were on fire. Her nipples were hardening, her labia was saturated with her juices, her body was trembling. How the hell could she want him so bad and want to wring his neck at the same time?

"Because you're in —"

"Damn it, I thought you said you would stop reading my mind."

"You haven't promised to stop hiding from me yet."

"Fine." Pulling away from him, Kimberly stalked across the room and flounced onto her couch. "I won't hide from you and you stay the hell out."

"I agree."

"I don't believe you."

Laughing, Nico walked to Kimberly, dropping in front of her when he reached her side. "Then why have me promise, *Zingaro*?"

Nico was kneeling in front of her, mere inches away from her tingling flesh. Kimberly longed to reach out and pull him to her but something was holding her back. Fear and desire were terrible bed partners. As if sensing her uncertainty, Nico reached out to her, brushing her bare legs with just his fingertips.

"You don't have to be afraid."

"Stop reading my mind."

Cupping her legs in his hands, Nico stroked her shivering flesh. "I wasn't, *Zingaro*. I was reading your face."

Kimberly felt Nico gently tugging her legs apart but she did nothing to stop him. She didn't want him to stop. "What do you see?"

"I see passion mingled with fear and uncertainty. I see a beautiful, desirable woman. I see my mate."

Kimberly didn't want to acknowledge his words. She just wanted to feel what his hands were doing to her body. Nico started to caress her calves, slowly moving up her legs as he pulled them wider apart. When she pulled on her nightshirt she hadn't bothered with panties and now she was trying to decide whether or not to regret her decision.

"I am regretting my decision." Nico's words had her jerking her head up, eyes wide as she stared at him. Hadn't he promised to stop reading her thoughts? The liar!

"I can see by your face you are angry but I am not doing it." Nico stroked her inner thighs, distracting her from her anger. "I was only commenting about how I was regretting my promise to stay out of your head because I so wanted to know what thoughts were making you look so sexy and vulnerable at the same time."

Kimberly's face flamed at his words. No one had ever spoken to her in this manner before. It was hard to know how to handle all his compliments.

"Will you tell me what you were thinking?" Nico's hands moved closer to the curls covered with her desire. One swipe and he would know how wet she really was.

"I was wondering if it was such a good idea to forget my panties." Kimberly decided to throw caution to the wind.

Nico chuckled, pulling her toward him until her ass was just on the edge of the couch. "You have been very naughty. What if I had been the big, bad wolf, coming to eat you up?"

"Isn't that what you are, the big, bad wolf?" Kimberly trembled as Nico pushed her nightshirt over her hips, exposing her to his hot gaze.

"And do I get to eat you up?" Nico hooked her legs over his arms and leaned in close. Kimberly was dying to have him touch her, do something before she melted all over the floor.

"Yes, please." The words hung there in the air between them for a scant second before Nico smiled wolfishly and bent his head.

"Your scent has been driving me crazy since before I walked in the door, *Zingaro*. You smell of freshly cut flowers and musk."

Nico followed his words by burying his face in her folds, licking at her essence. The second his tongue touched her engorged clit Kimberly was lost. Lost to the pleasure of his mouth finding her as no man had before. Lost to the pain of her beast roaring to life inside her. Lost to the power that was Nico's alone.

Pulling her closer to him, Nico feasted on her tender flesh. His tongue tasted and touched every inch of her quivering pussy, drawing deep, ragged groans from Kimberly's parched mouth. She had pleased herself many times, but never before had the sensations been this intense.

Clichéd as it was, Kimberly truly felt as if she were going to explode in a million pieces. Her body was as taut as a bow, she dug her hands into his hair to pull him closer. The dream in no way compared to the reality of Nico's talented tongue. She wanted – needed – more.

"Please," she begged, her body arching toward his as Nico's tongue darted inside the slick depths of her body. "Please, don't toy with me."

Pulling back, Nico slipped his hand between her legs, inserting two probing fingers into her tight channel. "I haven't begun to toy with you, *Zingaro*."

"Bastard," she cried, pumping her body onto his tortuous fingers.

"You have no idea." Nico removed his hand to pick up where he'd left off seconds earlier. Fucking her with his tongue, Nico drove her wild, alternating his tongue thrusts with laps against her aching clit. Drinking her juices as they poured from her body.

He was punishing her, she just knew it. No one could survive this much pleasure at once. Just as she thought she couldn't handle any more, Nico enclosed her clit between his lips and sucked. Screaming out as her body convulsed beneath him. "Yes, oh God, yes."

Her beast roared with her, the howl mingled with her own cry of pleasure, bringing goose bumps to her already shivering skin.

With the sweet taste of Kimberly still lingering in his mouth, Nico sat back on his haunches, pleased. Never before had he seen someone give in to their passion so completely. The aroma of her pleasure lingered in the air between them, teasing Nico's senses with its spicy smell. It was a scent he knew he would carry with him to his grave. The scent of his mate.

"Good Goddess, that was great." Kimberly said it as if she were shocked.

"It's only the beginning."

"There's more?"

Smiling, Nico stood, pulling a lethargic Kimberly into his arms. "There's a world of more."

Kimberly wrapped her arms around his neck as Nico swept her into his arms and headed down the hallway to her bedroom. Pushing open the door, Nico dropped Kimberly to a kneeling position on the bed.

"Let's get this off of you." Nico pulled her shirt off and tossed it over his shoulder before kneeling on the bed.

"Wait." Kimberly held her hand up as she began to move back on the bed.

"What?" Nico growled. He didn't think he could stand it if she changed her mind now.

"Off the bed."

"Kimberly –"

"No, I want to see you naked too."

Easing off the bed, Nico smiled. "But you've already seen me. In your dreams, remember."

"That doesn't count." Licking her lips, Kimberly eyed him hungrily. "I want to see you naked and in Technicolor."

Throwing his head back, Nico roared with laughter. "Your wish is my command, *Zingaro*."

Nico stood at the foot of the bed watching Kimberly stare at him. Knowing she wanted him was the best aphrodisiac in the world. With his eyes focused on hers, Nico began to slowly undress.

As he bared his chest to her watchful eyes, Nico tossed his shirt onto the floor, stepping closer to the bed until his knees touched the mattress. "Don't you want to help?"

Kimberly dropped to her hands and knees and crawled across the few feet of bed separating them within seconds. Reaching out, her warm hands slid over his chest, caressing him with her hands as she had with her eyes.

"I feel as if I've dreamt of this moment forever."

"I know I have." Nico brushed his hand through her thick auburn hair. "I've waited years for you."

"You don't have to wait any longer." Kimberly slid her hands down his chest to the buckle of his pants.

Nico thought he was being tortured while Kimberly fumbled with his buckle and zipper. Her fingers brushing against his heated cock drove him insane with the need to feel her hands on his bare flesh. Nico changed his mind about the torture and felt as if he had died and gone to heaven when Kimberly finally released his engorged member.

"Touch me, *Zingaro*, learn the feel of me," Nico encouraged, pushing himself into her soft, cool hands.

Kimberly measured his length with her hands, stroking him from the head to the root before cupping his balls gently. "Oh my, this is so much better than in the dream."

Nico couldn't agree more. In the dream he wasn't able to feel her hot breath caressing his skin. All she would have to do would be to lean over and her mouth would cover him. Nico jerked with anticipation of such an event and as if reading his mind, Kimberly leaned forward. Nico held his breath as her tongue peeked out from between her full lips and swept across the head of his cock.

Pulling back, Kimberly looked at him. "I've never done this before."

Nico chuckled hoarsely. "There is no wrong way to do it, *Zingaro*."

Unable to resist the sweet temptation of her mouth, Nico slid his fingers through her thick hair and nudged her gently forward. When Kimberly took him into her warm mouth, Nico almost died. Her mouth was heaven. A novice, Kimberly started off slow, barely taking his thick member completely. The more she got into it though, the bolder she became. Wrapping her hand around his length, she stroked him as she suckled his cock. Groaning, Nico tightened his hands in her hair, fucking her mouth with steady strokes.

Nico knew if he didn't stop his little temptress now, the evening would be over before it really started. "No more, love."

Pulling away quickly, Kimberly looked up in alarm. "Did I hurt you?"

"Not in the least, but my body hungers for more than your sweet mouth." Instead of looking eager, Kimberly looked a bit worried. "What's wrong, *Zingaro*?"

"I want to have sex but I don't want to get pregnant."

If she hadn't looked so serious, Nico might have chuckled. They would be extremely lucky if she got pregnant at all, let alone on the first night as she feared. "You won't get pregnant."

"I know I won't because you're going to wear something."

"Something?"

"You know, a condom."

This time Nico couldn't hold back, he chuckled. "When they make one to fit me, I will."

"I know you're large and all, but you're not that large."

"It's not the length or girth, my naïve one, but because of the knotting."

Kimberly blushed. "I didn't think of that."

There was no doubt in Nico's mind that if he didn't pull out, he would knot inside her. Knotting only occurred in mates and even Kimberly's denial of their status would not change who they were to one another.

"I'm not going to lie to get you to have sex with me. You want to stop, we will, but if you're just worried about pregnancy you don't have to be."

"Why, do you have some sort of special pregnancy prevention cure?"

"Unfortunately, the Weres are suffering from infertility. The females are rarely getting pregnant, even mated pairs. Our race is dying, *Zingaro*, although I am fighting it at all costs."

"I didn't know it was so serious, Nico." Kimberly bit her lip, regret and uncertainty upon her face. "But I'm still not willing to take the chance that this will be the one time when a female Were conceives. I'm just...not ready. I'm sorry, Nico."

"It's okay, *Zingaro*. I will pull out before I knot so there will be no chance at pregnancy." Nico's beast roared with dissatisfaction but he tamped down his disappointment. He would make this promise to Kimberly and woo her to accept him as her mate.

"No chance?"

"A better chance."

"Those are odds I can live with." Smiling, Kimberly lay back on the bed, spreading her arms out seductively, she invited him to take her with every movement.

"We will take this slowly, *Zingaro*," Nico promised as he lay beside Kimberly and gathered her into his arms.

"Don't take it slow on my account." Kimberly reached over to stroke his jaw and Nico turned to press a kiss into her palm. "I'm on fire for you, I don't think I can wait."

Nico chuckled at her enthusiasm. "But, *Zingaro*, I want to make it last for you. This is your first time and the beginning of our relationship as true mates. This is not something you rush."

Rolling over, Nico pinned Kimberly beneath him, stretching her arms out above her head. He could feel every inch of her skin touching his and groaned as she opened her thighs, allowing him to settle his body into hers. She was making it hard for him to carry through with his promise to make it good and slow for her. What he really wanted to do was push himself into her and take her like the beast he was.

"I can't touch you," Kimberly complained, trying to pull her arms out of his grasp.

"That's the point, *Zingaro*. I would go up quicker than a torch if you were to touch me now. Just let me love you."

Kimberly gave a frustrated nod seconds before Nico took her mouth with his. He kissed her slowly, tentatively at first until Kimberly relaxed under him, opening like a flower before the sun. Her lips were as sweet as honey and her tongue was even tastier. Nico could have kissed her forever. Delving into her moist cavern, learning her taste by heart.

It took an act of God to pull away from her lips but Nico did. There was so much more of her to taste. Giving Kimberly a pointed look, Nico released her hands, daring her silently to move. When she stayed as he wanted her to do, Nico began his pilgrimage down her soft, curvaceous body.

Pausing at her beautiful breasts, Nico cupped the full twins in his hands, praising them with his lips. Lavishing them both one at time with his tongue, he toyed with the mauve erect peaks, biting them gently between kisses.

Kimberly squirmed beneath him, her need as obvious as his own. "Please, Nico."

"I want to please you, *Zingaro*. You must be ready before I take you."

"I'm ready," she growled, raising her head to stare heatedly into his eyes. "If I were any more ready, we'd have a river on our hands."

"I want more than a river. I want an ocean."

Deciding to test her bold pronouncement, Nico stroked his hand across her body and between her legs, combing through her damp curls to the sodden folds hidden there. Slipping his finger easily into her, Nico tested her readiness for his cock.

"More, Nico, give me more." Kimberly arched her hips toward his thrusting digit.

"Slowly, remember?" Gradually parting her tender flesh, Nico eased another finger inside. She was so tight.

"You're killing me here."

"No, *Zingaro*, I am preparing you. You are a virgin and there is no way you can take my cock without some stretching." Nico wasn't teasing since as a Werewolf and an Alpha male, he was much larger than the average human male. Of course Kimberly's body would eventually accept him, he knew she just needed to be primed.

Pressing a third finger inside, Nico brushed his thumb across Kimberly's engorged clit. She gasped at the whispered touch and arched her hips, begging without words for him to take her.

Nico could no longer ignore her wants or his desire. Taking his cock in his hand, he coated his thick length with her sweet juices, lubing himself in the nicest of ways. Centering his cock at her entrance, Nico looked into Kimberly's eyes, needing to watch her as she became his.

With a control he didn't know he possessed, Nico pushed into her slick body, biting back a growl as he felt her body stretch to receive him.

"Nico..." His name was a whisper on her lips. Back arching, Kimberly cried out softly as he pushed past her hymen and deep inside her body.

Nico's canines descended as the faint scent of blood wafted between them. "Mine," he growled low in his throat, surprising himself.

He had to get a hold of himself. Nico knew although Kimberly would adjust to his girth, he still had to be careful with her. He could hurt her if he let himself go. Even though she was aroused and wet from her desire, she was still a novice when it came to making love. And her inexperience alone kept him focused on her. It had to be pleasurable for Kimberly. Nico would have it no other way.

Pulling back slowly, Nico paused at the precipice, wanting to enjoy every thrust inside her tight little body.

"Please." Kimberly closed her eyes as she wrapped her legs around his lower body. "Don't stop now."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't. You can't."

Nico knew better but his beast had been given permission and took over his calmer thoughts. Pulling back, he gazed at her desire-filled eyes before plunging into her body, burying himself balls deep inside her. His hips thrust wildly, meeting her frenzied movements.

The beast inside seemed to wake from its slumber. The need to change came over him quickly but he fought it. For every thrust Nico made, his Were growled in approval. Nico could feel his senses expanding as he and the Were became one. His eyes dilated and his skin began to tingle the deeper he powered into Kimberly's body.

And his mate responded in kind. Nico could feel the changes coming over her. Her groans were mingled with growls, her nails digging into his back felt sharper. She was his mate. There was no doubt about it in his or his beast's mind. She belonged to them.

"So good, so good." Kimberly's chants were sending Nico to the edge of any control he ever thought he possessed. He pushed Kimberly's legs up, opening her wider to his driving body. She sobbed her satisfaction, begging him incoherently for the ultimate pleasure. His beast roared with the need to mark her, claim her as his mate. But he had promised he wouldn't knot inside her, so for tonight, he would have to disappoint his beast. Bending over her, Nico sank his canines into the soft valley of her neck, drawing blood and signifying his possession of her, marking her as his mate for all to see.

Nico knew Kimberly was on the brink and he could feel his own release pending. Reaching between them, Nico rubbed her clit furiously, sending her into orgasm. As her body clutched him, Nico powered into her one last time before roaring with regret and pulling his cock from her welcoming warmth, spilling his hot seed over her soft belly. His canines withdrew from her tender flesh, leaving an imprint of his teeth on her skin as she shivered in the afterglow of their loving.

"Shh..." Nico whispered, bending to run his tongue around her bleeding wound. The metallic taste filled his mouth and his senses. Never before had he had a sweeter release.

"Hmmm..." Kimberly moaned.

"Are you okay?"

"Never better." Kimberly lifted her head and kissed him tenderly before lying back on the bed.

Nico felt on top of the world. He had found his mate and claimed her. He could feel his beast clamoring to take her again and ensure his line by planting his seed. Nico had to fight his urge. He knew Kimberly was tired and would want to sleep. She was sated for now, but the heat was still upon her and she would be begging him to fuck her again soon.

"I can't believe how great I feel," Kimberly murmured as he cleaned the evidence of their lovemaking from their bodies before joining her on the bed once more. "I never thought I would ever be done with being in heat."

Nico chuckled at her words. "*Zingaro*, you are not done with 'being in heat' as you so easily put it. The heat is a cycle that will not abate until the full moon when it finally culminates."

"You are fucking kidding me, right?" Kimberly stared at him, disbelief clouding her face.

"This is no joke, Kimberly. Yes, the heat is gone for now but it will return. We will make love long and often before the full moon comes in four days' time."

"You mean I have four more days of this?"

Nico frowned. "It won't be as bad as before now that we've made love but it won't go away."

"Fuck."

"You don't have to make it sound as if you abhor the cure."

Sighing, Kimberly sat up and ran her hands through her tussled hair. "What I abhor is not feeling as if I have a say in the matter."

"I would never force you."

"You would never have to. My body craves your touch."

Nico turned over on his side and brushed his hand against her spine. "And your heart?"

Kimberly gave a very un-Werewolf-like snort. "Let's leave my heart out of this."

Nico chuckled as he pushed himself up, trailing tiny kisses up her spine. "It's too late, *Zingaro*. Your heart is already involved."

He knew his was.

## Chapter Five

"So I guess I'm a little too late to try and give you the 'birds and bees' speech." Sniffing the air, David shut the door behind him with a loud slam. "About six hours too late."

"Actually more like twelve, if you want to count from the first time." Kimberly continued running the vacuum, refusing to allow David to sully her wonderful night.

"Did he hurt you?"

*Did he hurt her? Far from it.*

"No more than necessary."

"Damn it." Running his hands through his hair, David sighed in frustration. "This is not the way I wanted things for you."

Kimberly shut off the vacuum and turned to look at her brother with a frown. "No, you wanted to keep me ignorant and sheltered. I can't say I'm not sorry your plan didn't work out."

"No, the plan was to protect you at all costs. The Were Machiavellian bullshit is what drove our parents to leave the Pack in the first place. And the first thing you do is run straight into the arms of a *Benandanti*."

"That's not the way it happened. Wait, why am I explaining myself to you anyway? This is my life, David, and I'll live it how I choose."

"Last time I checked, Kimberly, I was part of your life too."

Kimberly sat on the couch and fought to keep from strangling her brother. She loved him but sometimes he could be so stupid. "Of course you are a part of my life, David. But it doesn't mean I want to be wrapped in cotton and kept on a shelf."

"I don't do that," David protested, flopping on the chair.

"Bullshit. You never let me make my own mistakes or learn the lessons of screwing up. You decided what I should know and not know and how I should live. It's why I moved away."

"I never wanted to see you hurt, Kimberly. And I certainly never wanted to push you away." David's face was bleak and Kimberly could see all the hurt there but she knew she couldn't back down, not now. "You might have forgotten but I was only nineteen when Mom and Dad died. No way was I prepared to handle a fourteen-year-old or automatically equipped with the rules and regulations of raising a kid sister let alone a brand-new Werewolf. I had hardly mastered my change and you had just begun yours a year earlier, so forgive me if I left out some hows and whys. When they died, all I was left with was a million unanswered questions and you, and I did the best I could."

"You know sometimes I think they hated what they were."

David snorted. "You think."

"We weren't exactly the fuzzy Waltons."

"Hell, we weren't even the Addams, but looking around at what they left, I can see why they wanted to run."

"Running is one thing, David." Kimberly chastised him gently. "But as you said, they left us very unprepared for this life without them."

"I doubt they knew the car was going to roll off an embankment and I would like to think I didn't do that shitty of a job taking care of you. I kept us together and I kept us safe."

"I know, David, but you have to let go. I mean, come on, aren't you tired of taking care of little sister? Don't you want to have a life for yourself?"

"Right, not all of us can find a mate at work."

"A mate, I don't think so." Kimberly enjoyed sex with Nico but it certainly didn't mean settling down with a litter of puppies. At least, she didn't think she wanted such a commitment. Although the thought of spending the rest of her life with Nico wasn't as scary as it had once been. God, she was driving herself crazy thinking about this stuff too much. "Speaking of work, when do you have to get back to yours?"

"No time soon," David hedged.

"How not soon."

"Ever. I quit."

"Quit." Shocked didn't even begin to explain how Kimberly felt. David had always prided himself on the fact he was able to take care of them. He wasn't one to walk away from his responsibilities. "Why?"

"There were lots of reasons."

"Like?"

"Like we're wolves." David met her confused gaze with his steady one. "We're not meant to be alone. As small as our family was, it was the only Pack I've ever known, and with you gone, I'm...I'm missing the connection."

Kimberly shook her head in amazement. "In one breath you're talking about how horrible the Pack is and in the next you're longing for Pack life. I just don't get it."

"I never said I made sense, sis. I still think a Pack this big is too political for me to feel comfortable, but I can't be the lone wolf anymore."

"So, is this why you're so interested in talking about mates? Are you interested in anyone in particular?"

"We aren't talking about mates for me. And not you either, if I could help it."

Kimberly wasn't too keen on exploring the mate question too deeply right now. Unfortunately that left the only other topic currently on her mind, work and her boss.

"I don't think I'll ever be able to look Cassandra in the eye again." After the incident in Cassandra's office, Kimberly wasn't sure where she stood with her boss. Nico had hustled her out of there and David had taken her home so quickly she hadn't had time to talk to Cassandra.

And now she was afraid to talk to her. How would she explain everything? Kimberly knew it was childish but it was just easier to call off sick and worry about it another day. Plus, after her morning with Nico, she wasn't too motivated to get out of bed early.

"If you aren't going to work, do you want to go for a run?"

"A run? In daylight?"

"Yes, I think it's exactly what we need. To be one with nature, to feel the wind whipping through our fur—"

"To be hauled to the pound."

"Ha, ha." David tossed a pillow at Kimberly. Finally, the tension was gone. They were finally getting back into the brother and sister routine of the past. "Your boyfriend is the president of one of the largest natural wildlife preserves in the state of California. I'm sure he won't mind if we trespass on his land."

"He is?" The minute the words left her mouth, Kimberly wished she could call them back. The last thing she wanted to give David was more firepower.

"You didn't know?"

"We really haven't talked a lot."

"How long have you known him?"

"David," Kimberly warned. "We're not going to get into this."

She had seen him around the office but they had never engaged in more than office pleasantries until the fateful meeting in the parking garage. And now, even though she could honestly say she knew him physically, Kimberly couldn't say she really "knew" knew him. She knew how he was in bed but she would be hard-pressed to answer if someone asked her a simple question such as his favorite color or his birthday.

"I'm just asking."

"Well, don't." Standing, Kimberly stretched her body, still tender from last night. She hadn't known it was possible to make love so many times in one evening. If it were a Were thing, then hallelujah for advanced DNA, if it were a Nico thing, then thank God for comeback power. The man was wonderful.

"So, what do you say—you, me, trespassing?"

"Maybe," Kimberly hedged, "but I want to be back before dark."

"Before dark, why, are you going to turn into a vampire?"

Laughing, Kimberly shook her head. "You're incorrigible. No, I'm expecting Nico to call."

"And you want to be here like a good little wifey?"

*No she didn't, did she?*

Kimberly growled menacingly. It was better to attack David than examine her own feelings too closely. She had been so determined to gain her independence from David and then make sure she held on to it, she had pushed Nico away at the first sign of him trying to claim her as his mate, too afraid to give up her freedom.

"David, I really don't want to have to hurt you."

"Ha, as if you could. You know..." Pausing, they both turned to the front door at the same time. A light floral scent permeated the air.

"Shit, it's Cassandra." Kimberly groaned. She was amazed how acute her senses had gotten, especially since last night. "I really don't want her to see you here. It'll just stress me out more, trying to talk to her with you listening."

"Okay fine, I'll go back to the bedroom but hurry up. It smells like sex in there."

"Just go, she's going to get suspicious and take this stupid vacuum with you." Kimberly tried to calm her shaking nerves. She had dreaded this confrontation, which was one of the reasons she called off this morning.

The knocking continued and Cassandra called through the door. "Kimberly, are you in there? Is everything okay? Please answer the door."

Kimberly pasted a smile on her face before pulling the door open. "Hi, Cassandra," she started weakly, before being pulled into a hug.

Stunned, Kimberly stared at Cassandra as she pushed her way into the apartment. "Oh my God, Kimberly. I thought you were dying or something. Is everything okay?"

"Ahh, yeah. I'm sorry I called off today, I just wasn't feeling too hot when I woke this morning." Kimberly followed her into the apartment, confused as she watched Cassandra look around.

"Oh Kimberly, it's okay. I just was worried that maniac had done something to you."

"Which maniac?" Kimberly felt as if she were in some surreal dream. Cassandra was acting so oddly. Kimberly gestured to the couch, silently inviting Cassandra to sit even though she really was just hoping she would leave. Unfortunately, it didn't look as if she would be leaving any time soon.

"Nico Cassamonti." Cassandra sounded annoyed, as if Kimberly should know what she was talking about. "I mean, after yesterday when he pulled you into my office, I didn't know what to think."

"Ahh, well, umm, sorry. I was feeling a bit faint and he thought he would just help me out." Oh yes, here it was, the dreaded "What the fuck were you doing in my office yesterday?"

"When you told me you were dreaming about him, I had no idea it was because the two of you were together."

"Well, we weren't, not really." Oh boy, Kimberly didn't like where this conversation was going at all. She didn't want to look like a slut in front of her boss, but

if she denied a relationship with Nico, he would have a fit and she wasn't so sure she wanted to deny it.

"That's past tense. Do you mean something is going on now?" Cassandra looked embarrassed and Kimberly wondered if she had been attracted to Nico.

"Something...I..." Blushing, Kimberly couldn't think of the best way to explain what exactly was going on with Nico and her. For some reason she seriously doubted Cassandra would understand how the moon cycle had her in heat and she had to fuck Nico constantly or go mad. Her crazy life couldn't be explained in eight words or less.

"We're kind of seeing each other."

Cassandra's eyes looked as if they were going to pop out of her head. "Wow, and the other guy was..."

"My brother. David just got into town and he and Nico aren't exactly hitting it off."

"Brother." Cassandra grinned. "Well, that takes a load off my mind."

"It does?"

"Yes, I was imagining some strange S&M ménage à trois. I actually thought I might have to come untie you from your headboard or something."

"Ewww."

Laughing, Cassandra stood up. "Since my mind is at ease, I can go back to work with a clear conscience."

"I'm really sorry about today, I just felt horrible this morning."

"Say no more. We all have bad days. Just don't make it a habit."

"I won't." Guilt assaulted Kimberly. She hated lying to Cassandra, especially when she took time out of her day to make sure Kimberly was all right. "I promise to be there bright and—"

"Oh my," Cassandra's face lit up as she stared toward Kimberly's bedroom. "That's the cutest dog I've ever seen. What is he, an Alaskan Malamute?"

God no! Turning around quickly, Kimberly saw her brother trotting into the room and wanted to die. "David!" she hollered before she could stop herself.

Surprised, Cassandra looked over at Kimberly with a confused look on her face. "You named your dog after your brother?"

Fuck! "Yeah, uhhh...he was a gift from David so it seemed appropriate."

David was dead. Deader than dead. And to make matters worse, he was edging his way over to Cassandra's extended hand.

"David," Kimberly growled, vowing to kill her brother at the next available opportunity. "Get back over here."

"No, it's okay. I love dogs." Bending over David, who was damn near grinning, Cassandra petted her brother behind the ear. "Aren't you a good dog? Such a good dog."

Kimberly groaned as David sniffled around Cassandra's feet before slipping his head under her skirt. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry," Kimberly apologized before grabbing him by the tail to pull him back. How dare he do this to her?

"Oh he's a friendly one," Cassandra giggled, but Kimberly's face flamed at Cassandra's words. She had to get him out of there and the sooner the better.

"A little too friendly," Kimberly muttered as she grabbed David by the scruff of the neck, intent on pulling him out of the room.

"Don't worry, I'm used to dogs. It's okay." Cassandra continued to protest, but Kimberly doggedly pulled David along as he whined and struggled in her grip. She leaned over and muttered, "You better stop it, asshole, or you're going to the vet."

Shoving him into the bedroom, Kimberly glared at David as he sat on his haunches, tongue lolling out of his mouth. "You are sooo in trouble right now."

Turning, Kimberly slammed the door before returning to the living room. "Sorry, he's very unruly." Kimberly thought her excuse sounded lame but Cassandra just smiled.

"Don't worry about it. I love dogs. Now that I know you have one, I'll have to drop by once in a while to see if he'd want to go out and play." Kimberly groaned inwardly. David was going to have to go to doggie heaven soon.

"Yeah...you'll have to do that."

"All right, I'm off. I'll see you Monday, bright and early."

"With doughnuts," Kimberly promised, trying her best to fix today's faux pas.

As soon as she shut the door behind Cassandra, Kimberly yelled David's name. The bastard. How dare he?

"You rang?" David strolled back into the living room, pulling his shirt over his head.

Grabbing the pillow off the couch, Kimberly jumped on her brother's back, beating him on the head with the pillow. Laughing, David tossed her over his shoulder and dodged behind the recliner. "Calm down, Kimmie."

"Calm down? Calm down! That was my boss you were molesting."

"I wasn't molesting her and besides she liked it. She's used to friendly dogs, remember?"

Kimberly jumped up, intent on beating her brother into next week. "But you're not a dog. You're a pig."

"She liked it." He grinned, making sure to keep something in front of him. "And she smelled fucking great. I wonder what that was."

"Her crotch."

"Who are you telling? Think she might be into bestiality?"

Gasping, Kimberly grabbed the lamp from off her side table and threw it at her brother, ripping the cord out of the wall in the process. "You're a sick, sick individual."

"No, I'm a Werewolf, sis. We're ruled by our beast. You've just never experienced it before but you'll learn soon enough we answer nature's call and there is only so much we can control."

"If you or your beast go within an inch of my boss, I'll make a throw rug out of you."

Raising a brow, David crossed his arms over his chest. "Didn't you just get through telling me to stay out of your love life?"

"Yes, but, David —"

"No buts. I'll stay out of yours and you'll stay out of mine."

"She's human, David." Kimberly couldn't help but warn.

"So am I, half the time."

"I don't want to see you get hurt."

Smiling, David came from behind the chair. "Welcome to my world."

\* \* \* \* \*

"So let me get this straight." The anger in Kimberly's tone resonated over the phone line. "You're not coming over tonight, because you have to hang out at a bar and meet some friends."

"Not friends, *Zingaro*, allies."

"Allies...I see."

Nico seriously doubted it. "If it were my decision, I would be there."

"I'm sorry, *Benandanti*, I thought it was."

Swearing under his breath, Nico tried his damndest to keep his temper in check. "I'm not going to have an argument with you about this, Kimberly."

"You're right. You're not."

The threat in her voice wasn't difficult to detect. "Don't you dare hang up!"

"I just want to point out it was you who pursued me. I never wanted to have sex with you in the first place —"

"I beg to differ, love."

"And now that we are having sex, you should at least keep your end of the deal and come over here and —"

"Fuck you." His words cut her off in midstream. There was a very long pause before she spoke again.

"Goodnight, Nico."

"Kimberly," he called before the dial tone greeted him. The stubborn little minx didn't know whom she was messing with.

If it were any other night, he would be there, in her arms, between her legs, wherever and however she wanted, but tonight they were meeting with the *Benandanti* of the Morbauch clan and Nico couldn't miss it. No matter how much he might want to.

The meeting came up at the very last minute. Unfortunately, he was informed only a few hours after he made plans with Kimberly and she didn't take it as well as he'd hoped.

Trying to shake off their argument, Nico attempted to focus on the upcoming meeting. Until this point, Nico had only spoken through emissaries. Although he believed in his plan for a truce, until he met face-to-face with Santana and could size up the man, Nico wouldn't know if he could trust Santana's character.

"Trouble in paradise?" Remy spoke from behind Nico, interrupting his thoughts.

"Where have you been all night?" Nico ignored Remy's question.

"That damn *Rakshasa* has been following me around all day." Remy snorted, and glanced back over her shoulder, as if her words would conjure him to appear. "You know, if you hadn't put us all out on the street protecting your new girlfriend, I wouldn't have to spend time with him."

Nico was a bit taken back by Remy's hostility toward the Pack's *Rakshasa*, Jace McClellan. As a seer for the *Brachyurus*, Jace held a certain level of authority with Nico and the *Maggiore*. His word was sacred and his insights were valid.

"Remy, where is your respect? You know the *Rakshasa* have given great service to the clan, warning us of upcoming troubles and plots. They were invaluable during the Great War."

"I've read the history books but I get tired of all the cryptic bullshit." Remy rolled her eyes. Nico knew she didn't hold much stock in the abilities of the *Rakshasa* to predict future problems, but Nico had heard too many stories of their powers to not hold them in high regard.

"So should I ask why he was following you around all day?" Nico knew sometimes it was hard to get to the point with Remy when she got off on a tangent and he had to rein her in.

Remy sighed heavily. "I know you are going to take this all wrong. It's one of the reasons I've been avoiding you."

"Okay, spill it." Nico hated it when Remy decided she was going to protect him from himself. The one bad thing about having a bodyguard was it made a person seemed childlike somehow.

"He says there's something off about the meeting tonight but he can't pin it down. He is so fucking useless."

"Remy, I don't ever want you to say anything like that again." Nico knew he sounded harsh, but if anyone had heard her speak and not known it was a personal issue, they might believe she was one of those Weres who felt the *Rakshasa* were an abomination. "Now tell me more about what's off about the meeting tonight."

Crinkling her nose at him, Remy put her hands on her slim hips and eyed him sarcastically. "I know technically you are the boss of me but don't go thinking you're the boss of me. I'll say what I want about that nuisance anytime I please."

"Excuse me." Startled, Nico stared at his friend. Never before had she ever addressed him with so much disrespect.

"No." Sighing, Remy ran her hand warily through her chocolate locks. "Excuse me. I'm just tired and pissy."

"Why?"

"Have you ever tried walking around with a talking fortune cookie? I mean if he were any more cryptic, he'd need a decoder. He's fucking driving me insane."

"It can't be that bad."

"Fine, let's switch jobs, you hang out with him and I'll get fucked all day."

Bursting out laughing, Nico pulled Remy into his arms. Their banter could always make him feel better, even when he was still thinking about pulling Kimberly over his lap. Growling, she batted at him a bit before giving in to his embrace. Her familiar scent brought a smile to his soul. No taller than his shoulder, Remy fit with ease in his arms, a place she had been many times. Sometimes there was nothing as comforting as Pack. And Remy was a Were who had needed comforting a lot growing up. "I'm sorry Jace has been giving you a hard time tonight."

"Tonight," she grumbled, pulling back. "Try all of his life."

"But we need him for tonight."

"Well, can I make him into a nice ball of yarn tomorrow?"

"If he could shift, I would say yes, but since he can't, I'll say no. A human ball of thread could get very messy."

Snickering, Remy looked at him with a smile. "Messy but tasty."

"Very." A car pulled into the parking lot, shining its bright headlights onto the pair. Turning to look at the familiar black Hummer, Nico slipped his hand in his pocket and waited for Derek to join them.

"I still say he's overcompensating," Remy teased as Derek jumped out of the vehicle.

"I heard that, Remington," Derek teased back, walking across the lot to meet them. As usual the Asian man was dressed all in black, blending in with the dark night sky. "And I'm more than willing to prove you wrong."

"Yeah, but if I sleep with you, then technically I've slept with everyone you've slept with and I refuse to go into triple digits. A girl's got to have her standards."

"Ouch, that was not nice."

Leering, Remy teased, "Neither am I."

"Let's take this party inside," Nico directed, turning to go back into the bar. If he didn't stop them, Remy and Derek would be at it all night.

But Derek was the least of Nico's concerns because as soon as they entered the establishment, Remy spotted Jace sitting at the bar, flirting with a pretty, young Were.

"Aww," she moaned. "Who invited him?"

At the sound of her voice, Jace turned toward them and smiled. Even though he wasn't a shifter, he was built similar to one. The DNA he shared with his Were kin made him lithe yet muscular but he wasn't able to turn as they did. His premonition was a double-edged sword. It granted him mystical powers but held back his basic Were gifts. Nico always thought it was a bit unfair he shared their strengths but not their beasts—it was the best of both worlds.

Standing up, the blond *Rakshasa* made his way across the room, arms opened wide. "Sunshine, aren't you glad to see me?"

Jace went to hug her but was held back by Remy's hand held out in front of her.

"Touch me and die."

Her words seemed not to affect the boisterous man. "Ahh, I thought we had a great time this afternoon?"

"Who told him he could come?" Refusing to answer the question, Remy turned accusing eyes toward Nico, who was having a hard time keeping a straight face. It was amusing to see Jace get under Remy's skin. Normally she was as cool as they came, but there was just something about Jace that rubbed Remy the wrong way. Everyone knew it, especially Jace, who went out of his way to antagonize her at every opportunity.

"I did, Remy. We might need him," Nico said.

"Like we need a hole in the head," she grumbled, taking a seat at the bar. "This is supposed to be sacred ground."

"It's a bar, Remy," Jace teased.

"It's a bar, Remy," she mocked in a high-pitched tone. "I know it's a bar, but it's *our* bar."

"And without me, there wouldn't be a sacred place for you all to go."

"Think awful highly of yourself don't you, watcher boy?"

"Stop it." Shaking his head, Nico didn't have time for this. "Jace is just as much a part of our Pack as every shape-shifter you call kin. He's part of the club, Remy, so deal."

"If he gets a secret decoder ring, I'm resigning."

"There's a secret ring?" Jace's eyes twinkled as he tried but failed to look innocent.

"Shut up." Remy leaned over the bar and grabbed a beer from the bartender, acting as if she were completely ignoring the rousing greetings as more of the clan members began to arrive. Nico knew she saw and heard everything that was going on. Her job as *Venator* would allow her to do nothing less.

Nico pulled Jace away from the bar, intent on following up on this "bad feeling" he had about the meeting tonight. Nico was not interested in having this evening fucked in

any way. The clan could not afford it and neither could he. It would be just the kind of ammunition Franklin would use to turn everyone against him.

"What's up?"

"Remy told me about the premonition you had about this evening. Any hints you can give me about what it all means?" Nico would love it if Jace suddenly gave him a word-by-word rundown of the evening but of course, it never worked that way.

"All I know is it's not dangerous, but the Morbauch clan is definitely hiding something." Damn it, Remy was right. This cryptic shit sucked sometimes.

"And no idea what it might be?" Nico was struggling to keep the sarcasm from his voice.

"Sorry, man, I just sense they're hiding something but I also sense this evening's outcome won't lead to tragedy. It's the best I can do." Jace looked upset that he couldn't give Nico more.

"It's okay, we're all frustrated." Nico clapped Jace on the shoulder and they returned to the bar to await the Morbauch Pack. The emissaries had set the time at midnight so they would be arriving any minute now.

Kellen, who had been outside standing guard, stepped into The Howler and headed straight for Nico. His normally jovial face was set in a serious line. Everyone was on guard tonight. Whether they needed to be or not. "Hey, boss, I think company has arrived."

With a nod of his head, Nico headed to the rear of the bar to a set of tables sectioned off tonight especially for them. He didn't know the Morbauch clan well enough to have it in their private room, and if they were smart enough, they wouldn't want to go into a secluded spot with their former enemies either.

Nico situated himself in a chair that faced the entire room, putting the wall at his back. It was the best seat in the house and the safest. Remy, who stayed at the bar, was now leaning close to the bartender, delivering the message Nico had instructed her to. He wanted the bar cleared of all civilians. If things went wrong, and they so often did, Nico didn't want any bystanders to get hurt. Too many Weres had lost their lives as it was.

The door flew open the second the clock struck midnight, as if the coyotes had been waiting for the exact moment to make their presence known. And as they walked in, Harrison began to shepherd people out. Yet even in the confusion of the crowd, the Morbauch clan stood out.

The air around them had a stronger scent, like the air of the sea, salty yet crisp. Their bodies seemed bulkier, not as lean as the wolves, but there wasn't a person out of the eight of them who stood under five-nine.

Remy sidled over to Nico, taking her place behind him, her hands close to her side. The energy around her hummed with electricity as she faced their opposition head-on. Nico could almost smell her excitement. She was ready for anything.

"Is it just me or do they all resemble fucking Ken dolls?"

Nico bit back a smile as he eyed the blond group. Leave it to Remy to crack a joke at a time like this. "Or as if they're going to a neo-Nazi rally."

"Nazis, the other white meat."

Clearing his throat, Nico stood as the Morbauchs headed in their direction with Kellen and Derek flanking their rear. The bar had cleared in record time, leaving just Nico's clan and their guests.

The two emissaries he spoke to earlier led the group, followed by a number of guards. What Nico didn't see was anyone who resembled a *Benandanti*. Great, maybe this was the thing Jace had sensed, their leader wasn't going to attend. Sure, it wouldn't end violently but it wouldn't end well either.

"Welcome to The Howler, gentleman, please join us." Nico was playing the gracious host but inside he was seething. He had had such high hopes for this meeting, thinking it would lead to more alliances with the other Weres.

One of the Weres from the Pack stepped forward and began to speak. "Thank you for inviting us, Mr. Cassamonti. I've looked forward to this meeting with much anticipation." Nico could tell the quaint little speech had been scripted, but still, there was some interesting information there.

"Please, call me Nico. But speaking of your leader, where is he?" Nico looked around, knowing there was no true Alpha from the Morbauch clan present. This was becoming more curious by the moment.

The Morbauch clan glanced at one another apprehensively, before looking back at Nico. His own clan began to sense their unease and came to attention, wondering if they were going to have trouble after all.

Just then the door of The Howler opened and a young female Were-coyote entered. Harrison stopped her at the door, glancing at Nico for a decision. Nico sensed no threat and nodded to allow her entrance. The Morbauch clan all reacted by moving to her side and surrounding her as she moved toward Nico. He wasn't sure what was going on but this night was beginning to feel similar to one of those bad *Twilight Zone* episodes.

"I am sorry to have deceived you, Nico, but my clan was protecting me. I am the leader you have requested to meet. My name is Rachel Santana."

Nico stood in shock, staring at the young woman as his mind tried to wrap around the image he was seeing. "Would someone care to explain what's going on?" Nico realized this was what the Morbauch clan was hiding but he also knew he wanted the whole story before he made any decisions about allying with them.

"May we sit? I think I can clear up everything." Nico nodded in agreement to Rachel's request and the clan leaders both took their seats.

"This wasn't an attempt to deceive you in any way. But since my husband's death, keeping my throne has been as difficult as keeping my head attached to my body."

"I wasn't aware your husband had passed."

Raising a brow, Rachel nodded. "There was no need for you to know. Until six months ago, we weren't on speaking terms."

Nico nodded, still a bit amazed this delicate-looking woman was leader of a brutal clan such as the Morbauchs. Killing first and asking questions later seemed to be their only creed. Many casualties from the Great War were attributed to the Morbauchs. It was only in the last few years the vicious Weres had appeared to be willing to put the bitter past behind them. The coyotes were as secretive as they were deadly. It had only been recently he had learned the name of their *Benandanti*. "And once we were?"

"I had to be sure you could be trusted before you were told."

"And you trust me now?"

"No, but I'm intrigued by your offer. We've been at war for years. Why does our mortality interest you now?"

"Because our mortality depends on it."

"And if I agree to your proposal, what then?"

Nico had been waiting for this moment for years. "Your survival, because it is as important as ours. Then your enemies become our enemies."

"But I know my enemies." Tapping her nails on the table, Rachel looked questionably at him. "Who are your enemies and why would we would want to cross them?"

Narrowing his eyes, Nico leaned forward. "Because crossing me would be worse."

"I'm not sure we want to get involved at all." Nico was starting to get pissed off by the cat-and-mouse game.

"Bullshit." Rachel looked startled by his reaction. "You damn well are interested, otherwise you wouldn't be here. You know no Weres can continue to survive as we have been. We both want the best for our clans. Don't be stupid and throw this opportunity away."

Rachel smiled and nodded. "Yes, I had heard you didn't often take no for an answer, and you are right, we are dying. I still don't like the idea of taking on more enemies, on the other hand, we could always use more friends. So tell me more of this grand scheme of yours to save all the Weres."

Nico knew she may balk at some of his plans but he had just gained a major foothold and a new ally.

## Chapter Six

Kimberly knew she was being a brat but she wasn't going to be one of those women who fawned all over their man, jumping at his every request. She refused to allow him or any other man to ever walk all over her, and if it meant frustrated nights with a vibrator, trying to alleviate the heat by herself, then so be it. She had rushed back like a good little girl, much to David's amusement, just to be stood up. It was humiliating and degrading and she wasn't going to put up with it. That's why when Nico came to her apartment, she decided she was going to hold firm and not let him come in.

"Come on, *Zingaro*, open the door. I'll tell you all about the meeting." Nico had started out forceful but now was dangling these little tidbits in her face, just daring her to open the door.

"I don't really care, Nico. I was asleep as you damn well know." Kimberly yelled through the closed door. "And if you don't stay out of my dreams, I'm going to get you neutered."

"I wouldn't have to dream walk you, *Zingaro*, if you would answer your phone."

"Me not answering the phone should have told you something."

"It did. You want me to kiss it and make it better." Nico's smooth voice floated around her, caressing her senses like a lover's hand. Of course it wouldn't have mattered a damn if she didn't feel as if she were being singed alive from the fire roaring inside her.

Kimberly had really thought the heat thing was going to disappear, despite what Nico had said. But it hadn't, and she was as horny as ever.

And the worse part was...the bastard knew it.

"*Zingaro*, stop torturing us both. I can sense your need. Let me in and I'll make you feel all better."

Kimberly's resolve began to waver as the cream pooled between her legs. His voice was a siren's call. It made Kimberly's insides turn to mush and she peeked out the peephole to see what he was doing.

As if he could read her mind, Nico straightened and stood back from the door so Kimberly could see his entire body. Even through the peephole, she could discern the outline of his cock through his jeans. Kimberly moaned as she felt a gush of wetness between her legs, imagining his hard cock thrusting into her.

Leaning against the door, Kimberly tried to calm her breathing, which had gone into overdrive. Damn it, she had no willpower at all. Kimberly wanted him just as much as he wanted her. She would just let him in, have her wicked way with him and then throw his ass out after they were done.

"You can come in, but only for sex."

"It could never be just sex between us."

"Yes it can," Kimberly lied. "Because I'm still mad at you. You stood me up."

"It was not my intent." Nico's voice held a hint of humor in it, much to Kimberly's dismay. "But I'll make it up to you. I'll tell you all about what happened when we're in bed together. After we make slow, sweet love and you are so sated you can't even move, I'll wrap my arms around you and tell you a bedtime story."

"What if I don't want you to make slow, sweet love to me?"

"I can do it hard and fast too, *Zingaro*, whatever way you like." Nico's words were a beacon to her beast. Resting her forehead on the door, Kimberly waged a silent war with herself. What was happening to her? With just a few words, she was surrendering to him again. She didn't know what falling in love felt like, but she was beginning to wonder if this was it. It couldn't be just the heat because her heart was too involved.

"*Zingaro*, have you made up your mind? Is it going to be sweet and slow or hard and fast?" Kimberly could just imagine him licking his lips as he spoke, or better yet, licking hers.

Throwing caution to the wind, Kimberly whipped open the door to confront Nico leaning against her doorjamb looking sexy as sin. "How about hard and fast the first time and then sweet and slow?"

Nico slowly pushed himself away from the doorjamb, smiling a wicked little grin. "Just twice? Oh no, *Zingaro*, you will have to consider all the other ways in between."

At his words, Kimberly yelped and turned, intent on running back to the bedroom. Although his words were spoken quietly, Nico had a hungry, predatory look in his eye that made her fight-or-flight instinct kick in. And she was definitely going for the flight. Unfortunately she only got a few steps in before he harnessed her around the waist and pulled her to a stop. He wrapped his arms around her, bending his head to sniff her neck.

"Running from your mate is a punishable offense. Lucky for you, I am a forgiving Were. Especially since I can smell your arousal." Kimberly moaned as Nico ran his hands lightly over her breasts before moving them between her legs. She would have collapsed to the floor if he didn't hold her tightly in his arms.

"Of course, I can't let you get away with such disobedience entirely." Nico turned Kimberly quickly before throwing her over his shoulder, her ass in the air.

Kimberly had a pretty nice view from this angle. Reaching down she tried to pinch Nico's ass, which earned her a swat. She wanted to be indignant but instead broke out into giggles.

Nico began walking toward the bedroom as he spoke. "You're in big trouble now, *Zingaro*. I will have to make love to you all night to cure you of this need to tease and torment me."

Kimberly laughed as Nico tossed her onto the bed. The teasing glimmer in his eyes did little to corral the lust brimming in hers. She would have never guessed he could be so playful. Kimberly was willing to bet Nico didn't know either.

Her Alpha Werewolf was doing a little playful striptease for her. Slowly removing his shirt, Nico winked at her before tossing it toward her.

Laughing, Kimberly caught the shirt and brought it to her face, inhaling his animalistic scent. His smell was, for lack of a better word, like catnip to her. Kimberly could roll around in it all day.

"Are you going to make love to my shirt, *Zingaro*, or me?"

Embarrassed at being caught molesting his clothes, Kimberly tossed his shirt to the floor much to Nico's amusement and got up on her knees.

Hands on hips, she faced him with a mock frown. "I thought we were going to discuss the meeting."

"I said after we made love we would discuss the meeting."

"What if I want to discuss it now?"

Unbuckling his pants, Nico slid the zipper down slowly, his grin spreading as Kimberly's breathing intensified. When had she become so cock crazy? "Do you really want to talk?"

Talk, hell no. Kimberly could think of many more yummy things for him to do with his tongue. "If I say yes, what are you going to do?"

His pants shimmed past his hips at the same time the words left her mouth. "To do, hmmm, let me think on that."

Apparently, Nico already had a plan. He began to palm his rigid length, his strokes long and sure. Words faltered on Kimberly's tongue as she watched him. Part of her wanted to run from the bed and replace his schooled hand with her mouth, but another part wanted her to watch Nico bring himself to orgasm.

"You are such a tease," she finally got out, dragging her gaze from his erection up to his eyes.

"Me...tease you, *Zingaro*? I wouldn't dream of it."

Heart pounding, Kimberly felt as if there were a flood bursting from her quivering mound. Principles aside, she wanted Nico inside her.

"Come here." Her voice was even hoarse to her ears.

"Where?"

Grabbing the hem of her nightshirt, Kimberly pulled it off, tossing it somewhere near his shirt. Naked underneath, she spread her legs, slipping her fingers down to her dew-coated slit. Her moans weren't the only ones loose in the room. Nico had paused in his teasing to stare hungrily at her.

"Come here," she murmured again, this time tapping her pussy with each word.

Nico released his cock and stalked to the bed. All traces of humor had bled from his eyes. Now they shined with passion and power. "Hungry for me?"

"Starving."

Climbing onto her bed, Nico mirrored her stance, his cock brushing against her middle, damp with proof of his own desire.

"You're not the only one who wants to eat, *Zingaro*. Feed me. Give me your sweet pussy."

Although his words were of her pussy, his lips claimed her mouth. Surrendering to his touch, Kimberly folded into him as his tongue danced with hers. The taste of barley and hops mingled with his natural flavor, intoxicating Kimberly as if she had been the one drinking.

Nico slipped his hand between their tightly entwined bodies, his fingers combing through her damp curls, parting her swollen lips.

Kimberly tore her mouth away and cried out with passion as his fingers slid deep within her body, his thumb caressing her swollen clit. He stretched her, fucked her with his fingers as if they were an extension of his cock. And like the hungry beast she was, Kimberly pushed down on his hand, arching her back, begging for more.

Much to her dismay, the pleasure didn't last long. Just as she felt ready to explode, Nico pulled his hand from between her legs, chuckling when she growled in protest.

"Get on all fours, *Zingaro*. Welcome me into your body."

His words sent a bolt of lightning straight to her core. Unsteadily, Kimberly turned and lowered herself until her hands were flat on the bed and her ass was in the air. "You want to mount me?"

Nico rubbed his hands lovingly over the slope of her rear, his fingers dipping between her lips, coating his digits with her cream. "I want to claim you."

"Same rule as before applies. You have to..."

"Pull out. I know."

Kimberly was unsteady at his touch, but his words almost sent her into a tailspin. She was ready to be his in every way, even if she didn't know exactly what it meant yet.

Nico growled and roughly pushed her legs apart. Kimberly trembled at his touch and his hands slid over her flanks, gentling her nervousness. "Easy, *Zingaro*, I would never hurt you."

The head of his cock nudged at her slick opening, searching for entrance. Kimberly pushed back against him, urging him to fill her. "Steady, there is no need to rush."

"Yes, there is. I need you inside me, Nico. Please stop teasing me." Kimberly didn't know how much longer she could wait to feel him filling her body.

"No more teasing, *Zingaro*." Nico increasingly pushed his cock inside her pussy, stretching her open. Kimberly's fingers curled into the comforter below her as he pressed inside.

"More, I want all of you." Kimberly was crazed with desire, her beast calling at her. This position only increased her frenzy, making her want to bite and scratch and impale herself on his cock.

Nico paused for a moment, pulling back before thrusting forward again, pushing deeper inside her aching sex. Setting a steady rhythm, Nico began to fuck her pussy with deep, firm strokes. Kimberly met him stroke for stroke, pressing back against him.

Pressure built to an unbearable height. Her pussy pulsed around him, her nails dug into the comforter, the fabric ripping in her grasp.

He was so deep. She felt him against her womb as if he were begging entrance.

"*Zingaro*." His words were hardly recognizable.

But then again, neither were hers. They were both too far gone. Too lost in the rapture to hold on for longer than a few syllables. "Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me."

As he pulled out and powered forward, Nico thrust so hard Kimberly's arms nearly gave out. Digging his nails into her side, Nico ground out her name, pushing into her with rapid speed. A loud buzzing filled the room as energy slithered across her skin.

Kimberly felt as if she were about to combust. It was too much. It wasn't enough. Just as she thought her orgasm was imminent, Nico suddenly pulled from her body, leaving her empty and aching.

"What...don't leave me." Kimberly tossed her hair back as she tried to turn, gasping when Nico growled and pushed her head back toward the bed.

"I want to come in your body, *Zingaro*, one way or another."

Kimberly shivered, her body still thrumming from the pinnacle of her almost orgasm and the vision evoked by his words. She could hear his shallow rasping breath behind her and tried to anticipate his next move.

Nico's hands were stroking along her thighs, causing her to tremble in expectation as he eventually reached her quivering pussy. Kimberly groaned and pushed back against him as he cupped her mound, collecting the moisture gathered there. Drawing it back, Nico began teasing her anus, rubbing her essence around the sensitive rosette.

"I...I don't know about this." Kimberly groaned as Nico's finger penetrated her hole, igniting the sensitive nerve endings there.

Nico growled in response, pushing deeper into her body. "Take it, *Zingaro*, take it so you can take me."

Kimberly cried out at the invasion, the pain melding with the pleasure. Her pussy gushed in response as she pushed back against his probing finger.

"Yes, *Zingaro*, that's what I want." Nico pulled from her body, causing her to whimper in protest. Gathering more lubrication from her pussy, he immediately returned to her anus, pressing two fingers inside.

"I don't think I can take it." Kimberly grasped the sheets beneath her, her body clamoring for more as she protested the invasion.

"Yes you can." Nico was giving her no time to object, thrusting his fingers deep and widening them inside to stretch her body.

The painful fullness was beginning to recede, replaced with pleasure and the need to move. Kimberly pushed her hips back, causing Nico to chuckle in response. Kimberly felt her face flush from embarrassment at her response and tried to pull away from him, but Nico quickly disabused her of that notion, swatting her ass with his free hand.

"You aren't going anywhere."

Nico pushed a third finger inside her, causing Kimberly to cry out in pain. He stilled for a moment, letting her get used to the feeling. She could feel the sheets bunched beneath her hands and hear her heart beating madly.

"Shh, *Zingaro*, just relax and feel." Nico thrust gently, with short, shallow strokes. Kimberly tensed in anticipation of pain but was surprised that she just felt fuller. The thrusting was increasing and Kimberly began pushing back against his fingers once again. When Nico pulled his fingers from her body, Kimberly groaned in dismay, surprised at how she suddenly felt empty without them.

She didn't have long to miss the presence of his touch though. Nico grasped his cock and thrust inside her pussy, coating himself with her juices, before pulling out of her body once again. Then positioning himself against her anus, he began pressing forward, slowly pushing his cock inside. Although his fingers had stretched her, nothing could prepare her for the thickness of his cock.

"Nico..."

Nico stopped but didn't pull out, his breathing rough and shallow. Reaching around, he stroked between her legs, causing her body to awaken to pleasure once again. Plucking her clit, he quickly brought her back to the edge of her climax. At the same time he continued to gently thrust the head of his cock into her, slowly stretching her anus. Never pushing all the way in—but never pulling out either. The mingling of pleasure soon sent tingling shivers throughout her body.

"Push out, *Zingaro*."

Kimberly followed his direction and once again Nico pressed inside, the head of his cock pushing past the ring of muscle that had barred his way. Pausing, Nico gave Kimberly a moment to adjust to the fullness before pushing deeper. She breathed deeply, giving herself up to the multitude of sensations bombarding her body.

Nico began to thrust, pulling almost completely from her body before sinking deeply back inside. Kimberly caught his rhythm and pushed back against him with every driving plunge. His thrust pushed her from her hands and she collapsed to the bed, her head cushioned on the pillow and her ass still in the air.

Bracing herself with one hand, Kimberly reached between her legs and pressed her hand against her aching mound, her own touch causing her to moan appreciatively.

"Put your hand inside you, *Zingaro*. Feel my cock in your ass."

Flushed with the conflicting feelings of desire and embarrassment, Kimberly slipped her fingers inside her vagina as he ordered. She could feel the ridges of his cock through the thin membrane there and stroked him in wonderment. His speed increased at her caress, his fragile control finally at the breaking point. Her own control was flimsy at best, her clit on fire as she aroused herself with every movement.

"Come with me," he growled as he pulled out and powered forward. He thrust so hard Kimberly's arm nearly gave out. Digging his nails into her side, Nico ground out her name, pushing into her with rapid speed. A loud buzzing filled the room as energy slithered across her skin.

Kimberly felt as if she were about to combust. It was too much. It wasn't enough.

"Nico," she cried as her orgasm tore through her, her eyes dilating, her nails lengthening.

Nico joined her in ecstasy, thrusting one last time, before his cock swelled with the knot of his desire. His seed pumped out as he bit back a groan of ecstasy. Her body clenched around his cock as Kimberly gasped when another orgasm tore through her. Kimberly collapsed on the bed as Nico fell over her, his cock still jerking, spilling his seed into her spasming body.

Panting, Kimberly lay on her stomach, staring at her nails in surprise. She hadn't fully changed nor had she stayed completely human. It was a conundrum. But she felt good. Her beast was curled up inside her like a sedated puppy. Fed and fucked at last.

As the knot eventually subsided, Nico gently pulled free from Kimberly's body. Standing, he left her room for a few minutes. He returned shortly with a moist towel that he used to tenderly clean them both before joining her on the bed.

"Nico."

"Yes, love?"

His words were slurred as if he were drunk from pleasure. It was a feeling Kimberly could well relate to. This was crazy, but it was much more than a heat thing to her.

"Now tell me what happened at the meeting."

Amused, Nico's body shook with laughter. "All right, *Zingaro*, all right."

Settling back against her headboard, Nico pulled Kimberly into his arms as he began to speak.

"The biggest surprise was the coyotes' leader. It's a woman."

"Really? Wow. I guess I shouldn't be shocked, but...wow. I never thought any Were Pack would allow a woman to rule them."

"She's the widow of the previous leader, but I can't imagine she wasn't challenged. She must be one hell of a fighter. And she certainly evokes loyalty in her Pack."

"Sounds as if you really admire her." Kimberly attempted to mask her feelings and put on a good face, but inside she felt her beast growl with displeasure. She couldn't be jealous, could she?

"She has a tough job on her hands controlling that Pack. And I thought I had it bad getting the *Maggoire* to listen."

"So tell me more. Were they agreeable to an alliance?"

"Time will tell, *Zingaro*. For now they're listening. Tonight was only the first meeting and we don't have a written agreement, but she is willing to call a truce and that's the first step. Now we'll have to see if she can enforce it with her Pack. As will I."

"Why wouldn't everyone be happy with peace?" She would never understand the quagmire of Were politics.

"Ah well, wartime breeds power for those who never would get it during peace, *Zingaro*. And some thrive in the chaos. But we will no longer survive if we don't begin to band together. Let's just hope that we both can convince our Packs of this truth." Nico fell silent and Kimberly mulled over their discussion. She just hoped the coyotes didn't betray them.

\* \* \* \* \*

A constant ringing alternating with loud knocking woke Kimberly from her slumber. She rolled over in bed, groaning as she noticed how light the room was. Oh boy, she had overslept big time. Thank God it was Saturday and she didn't have to go into work. Glancing over, she noticed Nico was no longer in her bed. Grumbling, Kimberly pulled herself out of bed. Grabbing a robe, she shrugged into the cotton covering as she walked toward the front door.

"I'm coming already. Hold your horses." Opening the door wide, Kimberly was confronted with a strange woman standing before her, sunglasses shadowing her eyes. The woman was tall, five-ten or -eleven, with curly black hair and ebony skin. Muscular without being masculine, she had an attitude without ever opening her mouth.

"You know you should never open the door unless you know who's on the other side."

Kimberly realized the woman was probably right but she wasn't going to back down and act scared. "Who the fuck are you?"

The woman smiled slightly before finally taking off her sunglasses. "Remy, Nico's *Venator*."

"*Venator*?" Kimberly felt like an idiot because she had no idea who this woman was or what she was talking about. For all she knew, this Remy person could be Nico's wife.

Tsking, Remy shook her head. "Yeah, Nico told me about that."

"What?"

"About how you don't know much."

*Fuck you very much. This chick was quickly getting on her nerves.* "Well, that puts you at an advantage because he hasn't said a thing about you."

Instead of taking her comment as an insult, the woman grinned. "Frisky too, huh?"

"Can I help you with something?" Kimberly was getting more than a little annoyed at Remy's superior attitude.

"Not really, I just wanted to visit the land of Mecca myself."

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about."

"I wanted to meet you in person."

"Oh goodie. Should I feel privileged?"

"No need to get an attitude with me. As *Venator* I watch Nico's back. And if it means I get to come over and check out the new mate, well, I guess it makes me the privileged one."

Kimberly knew she shouldn't be mad at this woman, but damn it, Nico was starting to piss her off. How dare he leave her blind like this? Sighing, Kimberly stepped back into her apartment, holding the door open for her unwanted guest to enter. "I'm gonna brand his head in with a frying pan."

"It's a tempting idea." Remy walked in, looking around her as she entered. "But I'm afraid I'd have to stop you."

"Why?" Right now, it seemed like the best idea in the world to Kimberly.

"Because unfortunately, it's my job. I'm his guard. Second-in-command."

"You?"

"Yeah, don't let the breasts fool you." Remy winked. "I'm fierce."

Kimberly smiled, loosening up. "Yeah well, you won't be in the bedroom, so who will save him then?"

Remy laughed out loud. "I think I'm beginning to like you."

Kimberly gestured for Remy to sit and she joined her on the other end of the couch, curling her feet beneath her.

"So what all did Nico tell you about me?"

"Well, for one, he says you don't enjoy being stood up."

Kimberly blushed as she remembered last night.

"You blush too. Good Lord, where did he find you, out in the backwoods somewhere?"

Kimberly's face flushed further, embarrassed at being teased by Remy.

"Oh hey, I'm sorry. I suck at social situations. I just say what I think and I usually don't think before I talk so..." Remy trailed off, and Kimberly realized they were both sitting there in silence, too embarrassed to continue.

"So other than being stood up..." Kimberly quickly tried to change the subject and break the uncomfortable silence.

"Well, Nico told me you're a Were without a Pack."

Kimberly wasn't sure how much she wanted to reveal to Remy about her family so she waited to see if Remy would say anything else, but unfortunately it looked as if Remy had the same idea and the uncomfortable silence was coming back.

"So, how does it feel to be part of a Pack?" There, the question was general enough without giving away too much information.

"I was raised by the Pack so I've never known anything different. I live and breathe the Pack, which sometimes gets to be a pain, but for the most part it's cool."

"So, how long have you and Nico known each other?"

"We met when we were kids, both of us around seven, but even then he thought he was hot shit." Remy snorted. "I had to protect his ass back then too."

Kimberly couldn't help but to chuckle. The thought of Nico needing anyone, let alone Remy, to protect him was mind-numbing. "Well, thanks I guess. For the ass protecting and all."

"No prob. That's not to say he hasn't saved me a time or two. But I did it with more style. None of his dream-walking 'where are you' bullshit."

"Dream-walking." Kimberly gasped. "It's not just a mate thing."

*Damn, now she was even referring to herself as his mate.*

"Hell no, it's an annoying Nico thing. Weres of great power often have additional gifts. Nico's is dream-walking. It was one of the reasons he was chosen as *Benadanti*. The position, despite what others might think, isn't always about the better, stronger fighter. To be a true leader, a true *Benadanti*, a Were needs to possess extraordinary power, as well as the ability to see past their own selfish wants and desires. It just sucks that Nico's ability is so damn maddening. I mean, he's a great leader and all, but man, get out of my head when I'm trying to get busy with Will Smith."

Instead of feeling jealous it wasn't something he did with just her, Kimberly felt a kinship with the other woman. "It is a bit annoying."

"I know, as if I don't have something better to do in my sleep then play tag with him." Shaking her head, Remy gave Kimberly a sympathetic look. "He's a pain in the ass. Are you sure you want him?"

"Very much so." Kimberly was surprised at the truth in her words. She wanted Nico, and she wanted him forever.

Remy sighed. "I guess this means I have to keep him alive for you then."

Kimberly bit back a laugh. Maybe they would get along after all. "I'd appreciate it."

"Think nothing of it."

\* \* \* \* \*

"So where are you taking me?"

Sparing Kimberly a quick glance, Nico smiled before he turned his eyes back to the road. "It's a surprise."

"I don't like surprises," she pouted prettily.

"You'll like this one."

"You're such a tease."

Nico chuckled at her childlike ways, but refused to give in. He'd given in too much when it came to her and so far it had gotten them nowhere. Kimberly was no closer to admitting she was his mate than she was two nights ago.

It was pretty obvious she was afraid. He still wasn't sure of what though.

"So are you going to tell me what Remy was doing over at your house?" he asked, breaking the silence.

Kimberly looked over at him in amazement. "How did you –?"

Pointing to his nose, Nico laughed when she sighed in frustration.

"You know that is very annoying. And rude. I don't go around sniffing you."

"I didn't sniff you."

"Fine, sniff your apartment."

"I live in a house."

"You're such a little smart-ass," she fumed.

"And you're trying to pick a fight." Releasing his right hand from the wheel, Nico placed it on her thigh. "But I'm not going to fight with you, Kimberly. I'm done with fighting."

"See that's the problem right there, you're the one who thinks he has to be in charge all the time. What about what I want?"

Now they were getting somewhere. Pulling the car over onto the side of the road, Nico cut the engine and turned to face her. "What do you want, *Zingaro*?"

"I want to stop being in heat for once," she muttered, pushing his hand off her thigh. "Do you know how hard it is for me to sit here calmly next to you and not try to climb into your lap?"

"It's the same way for me."

"Sure it is."

Nico took her hand and placed it on his rigid cock. Her eyes widened as her fingers instantly tightened around him. "I've been hard since I was outside your door. Your scent drives me wild, your eyes and lips make me feel crazy. Trust me, *Zingaro*, it isn't just you."

"Why is it like this? I don't understand."

"It's the heat. The way we're built. You're my mate," he whispered as he leaned his head forward to rest against her own. Her hand was steadily stroking him, making it a bit difficult for him to concentrate. "If you would only accept it, things would go a lot better."

Kimberly squeezed him gently before pulling her hand away. "Maybe that's the problem. I'm not used to being a Werewolf, knowing about this kind of stuff. You just

accept it because it's part of you. It's not a part of me and I have a hard time blindly accepting these changes to my body and my life."

Nico sighed heavily before adjusting his painfully hard erection. "I understand your reluctance, but just because you don't want it to be, it's not going to disappear. You're a strong Were and you can either struggle against the inevitable or accept your heritage and embrace it."

"Okay, so I'm trying to embrace it. Just don't expect me to jump into the deep end of the pool right away. I'm getting my toes wet in the baby end."

Nico chuckled. "Well, I don't know if I want sex with me compared to the baby end of the pool but okay, we'll take it slow."

Restarting the car, Nico pulled back out onto the highway. "So, back to our original conversation, how was your visit with Remy?"

"You know, you're like a dog with a bone. Do you ever give up?"

"Nope."

"Nope? That's all I get?"

"Call me curious."

"More like nosy," Kimberly muttered under her breath.

"Werewolf hearing over here," Nico reminded her sarcastically.

"Okay, curious, the meeting was fine. Other than the fact I had no fucking idea who she was when she knocked on my door and invited herself in. It might have been nice if you had told me you had a second-in-command."

"I wasn't sure if you were ready for the three foot part of the pool yet."

Kimberly smacked him for his smart-ass comment. "You ought to be a comedian, really, I mean it."

"So what did Remy have to say?"

"Oh my God, I get it. You want to know if Remy has been telling tales about you. Ooh, do you have some embarrassing fact you're trying to hide from me?"

Nico snorted in amusement. The last thing he was worried about was Remy saying anything embarrassing about him because it just couldn't happen. He was an open book and if Kimberly wanted to know anything about him, all she had to do was ask. But he was worried Remy might say something that might offend Kimberly. Sometimes Remy spoke without thinking and although he was used to it, Kimberly was not.

"Ask me anything, *Zingaro*, and I will tell you."

"Anything?"

The interest in her voice amused him. What had his little wolf being thinking about? "Yes, anything."

"This is going sound stupid."

"Go ahead."

"Do you like being a wolf?"

"Like being a wolf?" Nico couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice. Out of all the questions under the sun Kimberly could have asked him, this question shocked him the most.

"Yes." Her embarrassment tinted her cheeks. "Do you enjoy it? I mean, I know you can't help it, but do you mind it?"

"Enjoy and mind are two different things, *Zingaro*." Nico paused as if searching for the right word. "I am what I am. Being a wolf is as natural to me as breathing. I don't know how not to be it. I was raised with the Pack. I grew up with other wolves, running, chasing, living with it day in, day out. For me not to like it would be for me not to like myself."

Kimberly sighed and turned to look out of the window. "So I take that as a yes."

"Yes, I like being a wolf." A grin quickly came to his lips. "But there are times when I do mind it."

"When?"

"The heightened senses can be a pain in the ass on occasions. I would really prefer not to know who's slept with whom or hear conversations not meant to be overheard."

Kimberly smiled as he intended. "And the forced mating can't be all too much fun."

"Oh no. I happen to think it is quite a bit of fun."

Kimberly turned slightly in her seat to stare at him a moment before responding. "I guess maybe if I had been raised as you had, it wouldn't all seem so strange."

"Perhaps. It's the classic nature versus nurture. Will your wolf side overpower your human upbringing?"

Kimberly flopped back in her seat with a dejected sigh. "It's what I'm afraid of. Everything that made me who I am is going to be besieged until the only thing left is a raging animal."

"*Zingaro*, you're being dramatic. You will always be you, whether you are experiencing the mating heat or not. Do you seriously think you are going to start attacking men on the street?"

"Well, I started attacking you with no thought but getting myself satisfied." Kimberly's cheeks were tinged with pink and Nico couldn't help but laugh. "Damn it, Nico, I'm serious. I've never acted the way I have with you and it scares me."

Nico snagged her hand, gently brushing his lips across her knuckles. "Ah, *Zingaro*, I am very glad to hear I am the only man you've attacked. But you must realize this only happens with your destined mate. This is why I know we are meant to be together."

Kimberly pulled her hand away. "Oh come on, you were no virgin, Nico. You can't tell me you've never experienced passion before."

"Passion yes, but the kinds of feelings I have for you far surpass passion." Nico loved Kimberly but he was worried any major declaration after only three days would scare her further away. Nico had been looking all his life for her while she, on the other hand, had been running all of her life from herself.

Kimberly sat quietly for a few minutes and Nico wondered if he had gone too far.

"I never even knew I was a Werewolf until I was five years old." Kimberly's words, seemingly out of nowhere, caught Nico off guard.

He had gotten little follow-up information since the initial revelations about Kimberly and her brother. It seemed as if when their parents left the Pack, they had fallen off the face of the earth. There wasn't any evidence they had interacted with any other members of the Pack since then, and Nico was willing to bet that wasn't a coincidence. "And what happened when you were five?"

"I saw my father change in front of me."

Nico couldn't hide the surprise racing through his system. The image of a naïve five-year-old having to witness something straight out of a horror movie was hard to imagine. "How did it happen?"

"We had just moved—again—this time into the city and I think he was having a hard time adjusting to it." Kimberly gave a shaky little laugh before she continued. "I guess my father and I were a lot alike. Neither one of us handled stress well and one thing led to another and it happened. Of course looking back on it now, I realize he must have put off changing and the new environment must have taken a toll on him, but back then, all I could think was something very wrong was happening to my dad."

"Were you home alone?"

"No, David was there. He ran into the room when he heard me scream, only to do some screaming of his own."

"I can imagine." If Kimberly's father weren't dead, Nico would have killed him on the spot. The scarring the man had done to his children just because he wanted to escape from a war that ended two years after he left was irrepressible.

"No, I really don't think you can. Now I know it's normal, but seeing my father stand before me one second and seeing a big scary animal in front the next, tends to be a bit of a mind-fuck. The worst part, I think, was the not knowing if I was having a nightmare or a psychotic episode. Up until that moment in time, Werewolves weren't real. Monsters didn't sleep in the next room and we were your average normal family."

"What happened then?" Part of him didn't want to know, but at the same time, Nico knew she needed to speak of it. He was more than sure she hadn't spoken of it before. It wasn't as if her family could have taken her to a shrink. How could they explain to a doctor their daughter wasn't insane, she really saw her father turn into a Werewolf and when she turned thirteen, she would too.

"David hustled us into the closet and there we stayed, huddled together until my mother came home. I couldn't go near my father for months. I was scared of him and of what I was."

"And you still are."

"I'm not afraid."

Nico spared her another glance as he pulled into the driveway of The Sanctuary. Easing into his space, Nico turned the car off before he addressed her again. "Do you really believe that?"

"I do," Kimberly stubbornly replied. "Just because I have a hard time dealing with some aspects doesn't mean I'm a suicidal wolf."

"Nope, it just means you're a scaredy-cat," Nico teased.

"Okay, as a wolf, I take exception to your comment."

"As a wolf? Wouldn't you have to know what it means before you take exception to anything?"

Kimberly scrunched her nose as she spoke, defiance written all over her face. Nico was wondering if she would pick up the challenge he had thrown before her. "Fine, I don't know a thing about being a Werewolf. Okay, are you happy?" Before he could reply, she was barreling on with her tirade. "But you know what, I'm going to learn and prove you wrong, so there."

"You are just like a spitting kitten," Nico teased as he jumped out of the car. He could hear her cursing him through the window as he walked around to open her door. Swinging the door wide, Nico jumped back as Kimberly shot out of the car.

"Are you deliberately baiting me?" Kimberly was stalking toward him before Nico finally grabbed her and pulled her into his arms.

"And if I am?" Nico bent his head to her neck, inhaling her musky scent. He could tell their banter aroused not only her ire but her lust as well.

"I might have to unsheathe my claws and scratch you."

"I might let you."

"Pervert."

"Don't you mean purr-vert?"

At Kimberly's good-natured groan, Nico chuckled and dropped a quick kiss on her neck. "Come on, I want to show you something."

"That's what all the bad wolves say."

Looking around them, Kimberly took in a deep breath, filling her lungs with the fresh forest air. "This place looks a bit different from this side of the forest."

"This side?" Nico tossed her a confused look. "You've been here before."

With a knowing grin, Kimberly nodded. "I guess you don't know everything."

"Remy?" Nico questioned as they walked across the grassy knoll.

"No, not Remy. David and I came over here for a run yesterday."

"Without me? On my land?"

"I didn't know I needed your permission, oh great one."

"Well, now you know." Nico stopped at the top of the hill and slipped his hands into the loops of her pants. Kimberly mockingly fought against him but it was no use. The sooner she realized it the better it would be. "You're walking a fine line, *Zingaro*."

"Am I?"

Nico raised a brow in lieu of commenting and turned Kimberly around until her back was pressed against his chest. This moment was too precious to waste away the moments bickering. They had come there for a reason. It was time Kimberly understood her place in the world.

"This land is ours. We live, fight and die to protect it and each other. Do you feel it, *Zingaro*? The connection to the land. To the earth we tread upon."

"I want to know. I want to understand." Kimberly turned her head slightly to look back at him. "You just need to be patient with me and give me time."

"You have all the time in the world, *Zingaro*." Nico felt Kimberly's body relax at his words. She was beginning to accept and understand her role in the Pack. His heart swelled with pride but it wasn't the only thing swelling.

"It's so beautiful here, the moonlight shining through the trees." Kimberly was gently stroking Nico's arms as she spoke. His beast was ripping and roaring to be set free.

"There is no moonlight, *Zingaro*, it's just a myth. The moon only reflects the light of the sun."

"Are you kidding?"

"No, it's all a part of your perception." Pausing, Nico glanced at her. "Similar to how you perceive your beast. You think it's a part of who you are, when in reality it's what you are. Just because you don't see your beast every day doesn't mean it doesn't shape who you are and what you do in your human form."

Kimberly stood silently for a moment before turning in his arms. "So are we going to go for a run now?"

## Chapter Seven

After running from her beast all her life, Kimberly still felt ill at ease about embracing herself, no matter what Nico said. Despite what he'd believed, she didn't hate herself or her beast. She just wasn't sure how to be one without losing the other. And no matter how much they talked about it, she knew she would never get him to understand.

How could he? He was as comfortable in his skin as he was in his fur. It was an attractive feature. Kimberly even envied him a bit but she wasn't now or nor would she ever be him. A lifetime of hiding oneself wouldn't just dissipate because Nico growled at her. No matter how cute he looked when he did it.

Like it or lump it, it was the way things were. And as soon as she could stop staring at Nico's butt as he led them to the clearing, she would tell him.

"Are you ready?"

Glancing up from his ass, Kimberly tried her best to keep a blush from staining her cheeks. Even while giving herself motivating talks, she was thinking about sex. "For what?"

"To change, *Zingaro*."

Change, hell no. Fuck until she couldn't move, oh yes. "Tell me again when this heat thing will be over?"

A wicked gleam twinkled in his eyes as Nico began to unbutton his shirt. "In a hurry to be out from under my spell?"

Slipping her shoes off, Kimberly didn't reply. Her body temperature was rising and she knew from her experience in the office, if she didn't channel her energy, her beast would take over and make the decision for her.

"I didn't say I was in a hurry." Her actions belied her words as Kimberly quickly began stripping off her clothes, eager to be as naked as Nico seemed to be. She was sure she could convince him to fool around a little. Finally slipping off her panties, Kimberly stood transfixed as she stared at Nico. His sculpted body put the gods to shame. Kimberly's lips were dry as paper and she had to consciously close her mouth to keep from gaping at him.

"I guess not." Nico's words jumbled around in her head and Kimberly had to sort out what he was saying. Her body felt on fire and it didn't help to see he was responding just as eagerly to her.

"Umm, aren't we going for a run?" Although it had been the furthest thing from her mind initially, Kimberly decided since she had just made a big fool of herself, it was better to be in wolf form where her blushing wouldn't be so apparent.

Nico grinned and Kimberly knew he had caught on to her ploy. Dipping her head, she allowed her hair to fall forward, hiding her flushed cheeks. Concentrating for a moment, Kimberly gave herself up to the beast, allowing the animal to break free. It never hurt, in fact it felt quite freeing, but Kimberly knew from experience it wasn't pretty. From an observer's point of view, it would appear as if a monster were escaping from within her body, when in reality it was just the merging of bones, flesh and fur, bring life to a different form of herself. Suddenly she was sitting on the ground, staring at Nico standing before her. She stood and gently rubbed against Nico's legs, enjoying the tactile feeling of his skin on her fur.

Nico ruffled her gray fur teasingly before he suddenly was sitting before her. This was the first time Kimberly had seen Nico in his wolf form outside her dream. She sat back on her haunches, staring at him as hungrily as she had a few minutes ago. Kimberly couldn't believe the heat was just as intense in her beast form as when she was human. She thought the feelings would dissipate somewhat. Unfortunately she had been wrong.

Nico bumped his large snout against her shoulder, jarring her from her musings and urging her to stand. Loping ahead of her a short distance, Nico barked once, encouraging her to follow him. Kimberly took off down the hill, following Nico along the tree line.

The wind zipped through her fur as she sailed after him. For the first time in a long time, Kimberly actually ran joyfully. Not to exercise her beast, not to relieve tension, but for the pure fun of it all.

A sweet scent assaulted her senses, stopping her in tracks. Veering off the path Nico had made for her, she turned sharply to the left and into the deep forest. Nico's growl of annoyance spurred her on and soon the chaser was the chasee.

Fueled on by his warning snarl, Kimberly sped up, dodging branches and debris in her way. She could smell water ahead. The crisp smell of the spring urged her on.

If she could make it to the water ahead, she might be able to lose him. Of course, she hadn't figured into her deviant little plan how well Nico knew the area. Before she reached the woodland clearing, he was on her. They tumbled round and round before he landed on top of her, teeth deep in her flank.

*Gotcha!*

With a warning growl, Nico released her and pranced back. His gaze urged her on. Struggling to her feet, Kimberly hung her head as if in defeat, and when Nico stepped toward her, she turned the tables, pouncing on him, knocking him to the ground.

His yelp of surprise was reward enough. Jumping off, she took off through the bush, laughing as she reached the water's edge ahead of him.

Off into the water she went. Cavorting through the cool stream as if she were a hapless pup. Kimberly rolled onto her side, wetting her entire body before jumping back onto the bank. With a quick twist of her body, she shook the water from her fur with ease, still high from her pounce.

Looking around for Nico, Kimberly was surprised to see him stepping out of the forest in human form, his long legs eating up the distance between them. The heat immediately hit her deep in her belly and she knew she wanted him. With a quick decision, Kimberly focused her wolfish mind on her human form and transformed herself just as Nico reached her.

"You have been a very bad *Lupa*," Nico drawled, stopping just in front of her. Kimberly swayed as the scent of their combined arousal hit her. She raised her hand shakily, placing it on his chest. The beat of his heart and the heat radiating off him warmed her body and soul.

"Nico, I need you." Kimberly tilted her head and swiped her tongue over his chest, tasting the salty residue there. Nico growled appreciatively and pulled her close, pressing their bodies together. Kimberly could feel the evidence of his arousal. Snaking her hand between them, she grasped his cock, wrapping her fingers around him.

"Are you trying to tempt me?"

Kimberly laughed huskily. "Is it working?"

"Damn right it is." Nico didn't seem too worried. In fact, he was rocking his hips, encouraging her strokes.

"Good." Kimberly suddenly stepped back and dropped to her knees in front of Nico. Staring at him for a moment, she licked her lips invitingly. Nico growled back in response.

Kimberly's tongue swept across his cock, tasting the salty drops of pre-cum along the tip—slowly tracing the shaft with her tongue down to the base and then back up again. Circling her tongue around the mushroom tip, Kimberly licked his cock in slow, luxurious strokes.

Nico groaned his appreciation, spurring her on. Kimberly slipped the head of his cock in her mouth, gently sucking. Nico snagged his fingers in her hair, pulling her toward him. Kimberly struggled for a moment to open her mouth wider before she relaxed. Nico fucked her mouth tenderly, gradually quickening his pace.

Kimberly had never imagined sucking a man's cock could be so arousing. She had always believed it was strictly done as a favor. But here she was, Nico's cock in her mouth, and her pussy was wet and her nipples were hard. She knew if Nico touched her right now, she would probably come in an instant.

Suddenly Nico pulled back, staggering slightly as if under a large weight. "No, no more. I want to fuck you, Kimberly."

Kimberly dropped back to the ground, smiling at Nico. She definitely wanted to fuck him too. Nico dropped to the ground beside her, pushing her legs wide. Taking his cock in his hand, he centered it at her moist opening. "I don't think so," Kimberly murmured, pushing his hand away. "This is my coming-out party, remember?"

"As you wish, *Zingaro*." Nico chuckled, moving his hand innocently up in the air. "But it will be difficult for me to pull out of you when you're riding me."

"That's okay, I don't want you to." Turning the tables on him, Kimberly pushed him back to the ground and quickly straddled his body. "I want you to come inside me."

"You know what this means, *Zingaro*. If I come inside you, I'll knot. Your fear of pregnancy, however remote, may be realized."

"I know, Nico, but I don't care." Kimberly knew in her heart that she was his mate, even though she still wasn't sure what all it entailed. With one hand on his shoulder to steady her, Kimberly slowly lowered herself onto his rigid length. "Now I'm in charge. No more talking. I want to fuck you."

The words hissed from deep within her throat as his thick erection stretched her full. *God, he felt great*. It seemed as if days had passed instead of mere hours since he had been deep inside her.

"Ahh..." Nico closed his eyes, laying his head back on the ground.

Kimberly couldn't agree more. She felt powerful and vulnerable all at once. Nico felt heavenly inside her. His cock, hard and unyielding, thrust farther in her channel than he had ever been before. The pleasure mingled with hints of pain and the intensity made her want to cry.

Gripping him with her knees, Kimberly rose unsteadily before plunging down on his cock again. The grass-covered soft earth made for the perfect bed, seemingly designed by nature for their pleasure alone.

Her breath slipped from her parted lips like a whispered prayer. As she clung to his tense shoulders, Kimberly sank and rose with an unsteady rhythm. Her muscles milking his cock as she trembled with passion.

"*Zingaro*." Nico's hands quickly moved to her hips, urging her, guiding her into riding him faster. His nails bit into her thighs as she moved to his pace.

It had been too long for Kimberly to hold back her passion. She had held it at bay for far too long and now with her beast sedate from their run, it was time for her to feast.

As much as she wanted to torture and tease Nico, she wanted to come even more. Nico seemed to be of the same accord. Working his hand up her thighs, Nico's wandering fingers centered on her aching bud and did some teasing of its own.

"Fuck...fuck..." he moaned, flexing inside her.

So much for being in charge.

With a circular motion, Nico quickly brought her to the edge. Kimberly's body trembled with pleasure as she gyrated her hips, fucking him with all the strength she had left.

"Nico...Nico..." she chanted as she exploded around him.

Nico wasn't far behind her. He pushed into her with frenzied pumps. His hands now returned to her hips, working her back and forth, forcing Kimberly to ride him to his own bittersweet end. Nico cried out her name as he erupted inside her.

Kimberly gasped as the knot Nico had warned her about blossomed, spreading inside her like a fist. The fullness had her gasping at its intensity.

"Breathe, *Zingaro*. It may be a while before we unlock." Nico stroked her back and hips, soothing her with his touch. Nico's cock continued to spurt as the knot locked them together, allowing his seed to find its way to fertile ground or what she hoped was fertile ground. The thought of kids before had always scared Kimberly, but as she felt her body welcome him into her own, she could almost imagine a little boy with Nico's roguish smile.

"What's this smile for?"

Kimberly knew she was probably grinning like a fool but she just shook her head. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Brat."

After several minutes Kimberly gradually felt the knot beginning to dissipate, but the aftershocks from the experience reverberated through her womb.

Groaning, she dropped her head forward onto his damp chest, exhausted from the inside out. "Wow. I should be in charge more often."

Nico guffawed at her bravado, gently squeezing her ass. "I don't think my heart could handle it."

"You'll just have to try."

"You're talking as if you're planning to stick around for a while."

Happy he couldn't see her face, Kimberly smiled. "I heard a rumor somewhere about wolves mating for life."

"It's not a rumor."

"Then I guess I'll have to stick around for a while."

His deep chuckle resonated in her ear. "As if you had any choice."

Kimberly rose and looked at him mockingly. "I can count, wolf boy. This whole heat thing should have run its course in two days."

"The heat will never completely go away, *Zingaro*. Besides that's not what I was talking about. I'm not letting you go, heat or no heat. My scent is in you now, all around you. Everyone will know who you belong to."

"You're not letting me go?" Kimberly had to fight the childish urge not to roll her eyes. He was so damn Alpha sometimes it was sickening. Lucky for him, this wasn't one of those times. "Just for the record, you can't just keep me, especially if I don't want to be kept, and I don't belong to you."

"That's the beauty of it, *Zingaro*. I have no doubt you do want to be kept and you very much belong to me, just as I belong to you."

Any second now, she was going to call him a liar. Yep, any second. Wait, who was she kidding, everything about this man did it for her, even the stuff that used to annoy

her. She was in love and the damn fool knew it. Snorting, Kimberly eased off him and onto her side. "Conceited, aren't we?"

"Not this part of we," he teased, sitting up. "But I'm not so sure about your part."

"Ass."

"Brat."

"Caveman."

"Mate."

Narrowing her gaze, Kimberly crossed her hands over her chest. "As in checkmate?"

"No." Nico rose to his feet and then pulled her into his arms. "As in life mate."

Kimberly wrapped her arms around his neck. "Always have to have the last word, don't you."

"Yes, I do." Nico laughed before sweeping Kimberly into his arms and striding toward the edge of the lake.

"Don't you dare!" Kimberly wrapped her arms tightly around his neck, worried about being dropped into the cool water.

"I should drop you just for thinking such a thing." Nico began walking into the water, grimacing slightly at the cold. "A wolf cares for his mate, which means protecting her from harm as well as seeing to her comfort."

Kimberly hung her head in embarrassment. She was going to get a hold of this mate thing eventually.

Waist-deep in the water, Nico gently lowered Kimberly, allowing her time to adjust to the changing temperature. He swiftly washed away the evidence of their lovemaking.

"Don't brood, *Zingaro*, you will trust me soon enough." Kimberly smiled wryly, not surprised he had read her face so easily.

Splashing water at Nico, Kimberly laughed at his shocked look. "Hey, I stopped brooding."

"So you want to play, huh?" Nico began stalking after her. Laughing, she stepped back and lost her footing, sinking under the water. Coming up sputtering, Nico was immediately at her side, brushing her wet hair from her face. "Careful, *Zingaro*, you don't want to injure yourself."

"State the obvious, why don't you?" Kimberly ducked back under the water in order to sweep her hair back. Breaking the surface, she was surprised to see Nico turned toward the bank. Glancing over his shoulder she ducked behind him quickly when she saw three wolves on the shore.

"Nico, who are they? What's going on?"

"What's going on," he repeated stonily, "is exactly what I would like to know."

Nico couldn't remember last time he was this angry. It wasn't as if The Sanctuary were his private lovers' oasis, but the audacity Franklin and his cronies had to bother them when there was no emergency made him see red.

Just the way the Weres watched them as they walked out onto the bank, made his hackles rise. There was something predatory, more so than usual, about Franklin's stare, which thrust Nico's beast forward and he had to fight himself not to change.

Frowning down at the wolves, Nico held his hand out to Kimberly, who took it hesitantly.

*"Don't be afraid,"* he warned her silently.

*"Damn it,"* she growled back, tightening her hand in his. *"I thought you weren't going to pop into my head anymore."*

*"Do you really want to have this conversation aloud?"*

*"Good point."*

With noses in the air, the wolves stalked toward them carefully. Nico tensed as he waited to see what they would do. If they pounced, he would rip into them faster than they could howl. Part of him wanted the confrontation to happen, but the other part knew this was neither the time nor the place.

But there would be.

And it would be soon.

The wolves stopped a few feet from them and rapidly changed into their human forms. Franklin, flanked by Clarkson and Keith, two of the other *Maggiore*, stood in front of them with frowns marring their aging faces.

*"Wow, I could have gone all day without seeing that."*

*"What?"*

*"Old Were penis. How gross."*

Kimberly's comment was so unexpected, Nico burst out laughing, confusing the men standing before him.

*"Benandanti, how fortuitous to find you here."* Franklin's smarmy voice grated on Nico's nerves. Did the Were really think Nico was so stupid he couldn't figure out Franklin and the Supremes had tracked him here?

*"What do you want?"* Nico decided there was no reason to be all politically correct and act as if he were happy to see them. And he especially didn't like the way Keith was eying Kimberly. He growled menacingly, causing the older man to step back hastily.

*"Perhaps it would be better to speak to you privately,"* Franklin said, nodding toward Kimberly.

Nico could feel Kimberly pressed against his back and knew there was no way he was sending her away. The fucking *Maggiore* were just going to have to deal. *"Sorry, but anything you say in front of me can be said in front of Kimberly."*

Franklin sneered but Clarkson was never one able to control his temper. "*Benandanti*, this is completely unacceptable. How dare you bring a mutt into the Pack? You have no idea of her breeding or lineage. This is just another example of your utter lack of leadership."

Allowing his beast to break free, if only a little, Nico's arm shot out and he wrapped his hand around Clarkson's throat. "Never insult her again or so help me God, *Maggiore* or no, you won't live until the next full moon." Clarkson's hands were scrabbling at Nico, trying to break his grip on him.

"Enough," Franklin drawled. Nico found it interesting Franklin did the minimum he needed to defend his so-called friends. They were clueless, not realizing they were just lackeys in his struggle for power and domination.

Nico released Clarkson, flicking him like a bug. He landed on his ass, coughing and choking. Keith knelt to help him to his feet. "The rest of the *Maggiore* will hear about this, *Benandanti*. You can't abuse members of your own Pack in such a callous fashion."

"It is especially heinous since you are embracing such...degenerates as the Morbauch clan." Franklin had to add his two cents, but Nico noticed he was smart enough to keep Kimberly out of his insults.

"Gentlemen, you may not approve of me or my methods, but until I am dead, I'm the *Benandanti* and I will rule as I see fit."

Kimberly gasped from behind him. "*Dead? Nico, what you are saying? Don't give them any fucking ideas.*"

"Don't worry, *Zingaro*, I'm not giving them any ideas they don't already have."

"You're not making my feel any better."

"Sorry, my love, I didn't know I was supposed to." Nico turned his attention back to the Weres in front of him. "If we are through, gentlemen...?"

"We are for now." Franklin shot a murderous look at Kimberly before transforming back to his lesser self. The other two quickly followed suit, leaving Nico and Kimberly alone once more.

"Wow, that was fun," she said aloud, coming from behind him. "So they're a part of the stellar clan you continuously brag about?"

Nico smiled at her remark. "Every family has their black sheep...or wolves, as the case may be."

"I think they're a lot more deadly than you give them credit for."

"Trust me, *Zingaro*, I'm not taking their threats or them lightly."

"So what should we do?"

"We?" Nico had to admit he liked the sound of the word *we* on her lips.

Shrugging her shoulders, Kimberly looked a bit sheepish. "Well, you're the one going on and on about you being my mate. I can't have you killed off just yet."

He was having a hard time keeping his smile at bay. "Not just yet. Well, we are going go back to the clearing and change. Then I'm going to contact Remy and call a meeting."

"And then what?"

"We're going hunting."

"Hunting?" Confusion flickered in her eyes.

"Yes." Nico looked into the thicket into which the wolves had disappeared. "For a traitor."

\* \* \* \* \*

The loud music from The Howler resonated through the thick walls, filling the quiet meeting room with welcoming noise. This was the quietest it had ever been with them all together as a group but that was part of the problem. They weren't all together.

At least not as a group. One of them was working for someone else. It was just a matter of figuring out who it was.

There was a chink in their armor, an obvious missing entity that was replaced by fear and distrust, and if they didn't act quickly, it would devour them whole.

Everyone was on edge. They could all tell something was up and they sat as if waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"So..." Harrison started, the first one of the group who dared speak. "What's with all the cloak-and-dagger stuff?"

"What do you mean?" Nico countered, taking a drink from his beer.

"I mean, you call this emergency meeting and yet when we get here, we're all sitting around staring at one another. What's up with that?"

"Well, we're not all here for one."

Kellen looked around, bewildered. "Who are we waiting on?"

"Jace."

Remy's groan resonated throughout the room. "Jace?"

"Do you think that's a good idea?" Derek asked, glancing between Remy and him.

Nico's nostrils flared in irritation. "Would I have invited him if I didn't?"

Having to explain his decisions to them was rankling his temper. Truth be told, he was still irritated from his run-in with the *Maggiore* two days ago. Now he was sitting in a room with someone he treated like a brother but who was truly a traitor. It had him up in arms.

"There's a traitor among us."

His words drew everyone's attention to him. Suddenly everyone erupted with questions.

"What the hell do you mean?"

"Who?"

"What's happened?"

Remy walked over to the table, slamming her beer on the poker table, effectively silencing all the questions. "Let the *Benandanti* speak."

"I know someone has been revealing information from our meetings to the *Maggiore*. It's nothing they wouldn't have learned eventually but to know the discussions we have here are being leaked is a major betrayal to me and the Pack."

Ryan pushed the door open and peeked his head in. "Sorry to interrupt."

"What is it?"

"Phone call for you, Nico. It's Jace."

Frowning, Nico stood and made his way across the room. "What did he want?"

"Wouldn't say. All he said was he wanted to talk to you."

"Thanks." Nico took the phone and walked to the corner of the room. He knew everyone could hear the conversation, he just wanted the appearance of privacy, if nothing else. "What's up, Jace?"

"Something's coming up. I can't meet you there." Jace sounded rushed and a bit panicked. "I want you to meet me at The Sanctuary at midnight."

"Why? What's going on?"

"I can't talk about it now. Just come alone."

"Ja—" Nico's words were halted by the dial tone.

"Bad news?" Harrison was the epitome of the understatement.

"Jace can't make it. We're going to meet at midnight at The Sanctuary."

"Midnight? This is really fucking with my plans for the evening."

"Damn, Derek, don't you ever take a break?" Jackson shook his head in amazement.

"I'm no nerdy boy like you. I love the ladies." Derek ducked as Jackson threw a punch his way. "Missed me."

"No need to worry about your love life, Derek. I'm meeting him alone." Nico stared thoughtfully at the phone in his hand.

"I don't think this is such a good idea, Nico. Not with all the trouble we've been having." Remy was ever diligent in her role as *Venator*.

"I appreciate your concern, but it was at Jace's request."

"Fuck Jace." Remy gestured for Kellen to rise from his seat and sat in his stead. "I'm not going to let you go out there by yourself."

"I don't recall asking your permission." Nico's cool comment silenced the room, stunning everyone, including Remy, who was staring at him in shock.

"Nico, you can't be serious." Kellen said softly. "Questioning someone's loyalties is one thing, but to go by yourself would be just foolish. You're leaving yourself open to be assassinated."

"And if I take someone with me, will their presence guarantee I won't be assassinated?"

"You will, if you stop being foolish and take me with you," Remy stated with a frown.

"If you're not the traitor."

Eyes widening, Remy pushed back from the table, toppling her chair as she stood. "You doubt my loyalty?"

"Of course he didn't mean it the way it sounded, Remy." Harrison stood as did everyone else in the room who was watching the pair warily.

The tension was deafening as everyone waited for him to counter what Remy had said and set things straight. But he couldn't and wouldn't give them the satisfaction. Someone had betrayed them. "All I know is, three can keep a secret, Remy, if two are dead."

Remy took a step forward, stopped only by Harrison's grip on her arm. The other were leaned forward and tried to whisper in her ear but was prevented by her hand, held up to silence him.

"Let her go, Harrison," Nico ordered, stepping around Derek, who foolishly moved to stop him. A low growl had Derek backing up as the room parted and Remy and he faced off. "Do you have something you want to say?"

Shaking Harrison's hand away, Remy moved until they were breaths apart. "Is the power going to your head, *Benandanti*, are the *Maggiore* right?"

"Do you really think I can't do this job without you?" he countered, steeling himself against the pain in her eyes.

"I'll guess we'll see." With her parting shot, Remy walked around Nico, pushing past Ryan who was standing against the wall in shock.

"Remy," Kellen called, moving to follow her.

"Leave her be," Nico said, sitting again in his chair. "We don't have time for her little temper tantrums."

"*Benandanti*, Remy is just concerned about your welfare." Harrison was attempting to be a peacemaker. By all rights, Nico could have her killed if he truly questioned her loyalty.

As he looked around the room at the faces of the men he had grown up with and fought with all his life, Nico could barely stomach the idea one of them was the traitor. It should show as clearly as the scarlet letter, but instead they all looked a little shocked and confused. All except for one. Nico paused thoughtfully before turning to Harrison.

"I will not continue to be questioned. I am your *Benandanti* and I refuse to constantly explain my decisions." Nico stood and stared at the group for a moment longer. "We will meet again tomorrow but not here, at Sanctuary. At which time I will reveal the traitor." Leaving them with his final thought, he exited the back room and made his way through the bar.

Stepping out into the cool night, Nico stopped for a moment then turned and smiled.

"So, did we get the reaction you were expecting?" Remy's voice drifted around him, although anyone looking at him would not have seen her. She blended into the shadows.

"Even better than I had hoped." Nico smiled as Remy stepped up beside him and smacked him in the arm.

"Just remember, you need me."

"How could I ever forget with you constantly needling me, ever-present, never-ending—" Remy shoved him then, cutting off his words.

"You wanna start something?" Remy danced around like a boxer, pretending to punch at him.

"As much as I would love to *dance*," emphasizing the word, "we both better get out of here before the boys decide to leave and see us chatting."

"You never let me have any fun." Remy pouted.

"Poor baby, guess I'll have to let you catch the traitor tonight."

"You have yourself a deal." Remy and Nico both silently melted into the shadows as the bar door opened and Kellen and Derek stepped out onto the empty sidewalk.

## Chapter Eight

"If he's not here in another ten minutes, we're leaving," David grumbled, plopping onto the barstool next to Kimberly.

"I don't recall inviting you in the first place."

"You didn't have to."

"So, I shouldn't have to listen to you grumble either."

Narrowing his eyes, David refrained from saying anything. Not as if it would do any good in the first place. Kimberly was past the time when she listened to anything he said. So headstrong and naïve, two qualities that were going to lead her straight into trouble and Nico was in it up to his scruffy little neck.

"What time did he say he'd be here?"

"Eleven-ish."

"He said eleven-ish? What a pansy."

Kimberly tossed him an annoyed look. "No, his secretary did."

"So wait a minute. He couldn't even take the time to call you himself? He had his secretary call and order you to show up here?" David was not liking this guy one bit. If the asshole thought he could order David's baby sister around, he had another think coming. And David sure as shit didn't like the idea of Kimberly taking those orders.

"He didn't order me. Jeez, you make him sound as if he's some kind of dictator. He's a busy man. His secretary called and asked me to come."

David thought he was going to throw up. The Nico lovefest was sickening.

"Don't give me that face," Kimberly chided. "Nico had a rough day. He was going to talk to the *Maggiore* and —"

"Fine, he's a wonderful guy." David wasn't interested in a blow-by-blow account of Nico's day. Picking up his beer, David took a swig and glanced around the bar. It was about three-quarters filled and most of them were Were. For all his good looks and sissy boy getups, Nico had shitty taste in hangouts. The bar, if that was what they could call this pissant of a watering hole, was lacking in several departments. Décor, drinks and dames, just to name a few. There were more Were-animals in there to suit David's peace of mind and the music sucked balls too. This was not his idea of a way to spend a Monday night, but he had come for Kimberly's sake. And boy did she owe him big time.

Even if she didn't want to admit it.

"Look, I'm going to the ladies' room to freshen up. I'll be back in just a minute." Kimberly slid off her stool and tugged at the short skirt she was wearing. David

couldn't stand the more risqué clothing Kimberly was wearing now. In fact, it really pissed him off. His Kimmie, the kid he had practically raised, preferred denim and jerseys over leather and lace. The new half-dressed *Kimberly*, who was showing all her business to everybody, needed to be sent back to her room and in a hurry.

"So what, do you expect me to hold your purse or something?"

Kimberly rolled her eyes. "No, I'm taking it with me. No need to worry about the homo factor." Spinning on her heel, she walked to the back of the building. David turned back to the bar, catching the attention of the bartender.

"Get me another beer."

"Make it two."

David went as still as the night as an older Were made himself comfortable on the barstool next to him. The bar was filled but it wasn't overflowing. There were plenty of empty seats available so David saw no need for the man to sit next to him. This Were's presence made him uneasy. He didn't growl that way.

The Were must have sensed his unease because he looked over at David and chuckled, "Hackles down, junior. I'm just here to enjoy a drink."

"There are plenty of seats for you to enjoy your drink on."

"Yes, but none next to someone who came in with Cassamonti's mate."

David turned to the dark-haired man and frowned. He hated when he was right. It was about to rain shit everywhere, starting with the son of a bitch next to him. "Can I help you with anything?"

"You're new around this part, aren't you?"

"Are you taking a survey?"

"There've been a lot of new faces popping up. I just like to keep track of them. It's nice to know who's on whose side."

"I wasn't aware there were sides."

Taking a sip of his beer, the man peered out onto the dance floor. "There're always sides, son. Always."

Everything about this Were rubbed David the wrong way, from the sour smell wafting from him to his presumptuous attitude. These were the bastards who were after Nico and if they were enemies of Nico, then they were against his sister. And anyone against Kimberly automatically became enemies of David.

"I suggest you take your beer and move on, old man."

Instead of heeding David's warning, the man smiled at him. "And I suggest you talk to your sister about the company she keeps. She's a pretty little bitch."

The blaring music did little to cover the growl David emitted at his threat. Several Weres turned in their direction, including the bartender, who quickly made his way toward them. "Is there a problem here, Franklin?"

"Not at all." Franklin dropped a few bills on the bar and stood. "We were just clearing the air."

"Yes," David said, committing the fellow's face to memory. "Consider the air cleared."

At the very first opportunity, he was going to wipe the floor with the bastard.

"I think you're through here too, mister."

"I'm not leaving until my sister gets back." The bartender sneered at David but turned back to the crowd to take an order.

"Miss me?" Kimberly hopped on the stool Franklin had just seconds earlier vacated.

"Yeah, I almost called missing persons." David knew he was being rude but this latest confrontation was just another example of why his family had left the Were community—too many politics. "Look, I think I'm going to get out of here."

"Is everything okay?" Kimberly was looking concerned and David didn't want to have to explain how her boyfriend had some mean-ass enemies and unfortunately they were a part of Nico's own Pack.

"Yeah, everything's fine. You were right. I never should have tagged along." David stood and began to shrug into his jacket.

"Hey." Kimberly tugged on his sleeve. "I appreciate you coming."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." He rolled his eyes, much to her amusement.

"I love you, butthead."

David dropped a quick kiss on her cheek. "Call me when you get home."

"Yes, master."

"Kimberly—"

"Fine, I'll call."

With a final glance in the direction of the watchful bartender, David headed out of the bar. Just as he reached the exit, the heavy wood door flew open and Kimberly's boss Cassandra walked in, bumping right into him.

"Sorry," she laughed, backing up.

Good Lord, there was that sweet smell again. Looking down at the petite blonde, David felt his mouth go dry. He would recognize her scent anywhere. The smell of dried roses and sunlight drifted around him as she tried to step out of his path and David had to do everything in his power not to pounce on her like the horny animal he was. "No apology necessary, Cassandra."

Stepping out of the way of the incoming traffic, Cassandra lifted a brow questionably. "Well, well, well, if it isn't..."

What a flirt, David thought with a smile. "Ah, don't tell me you don't remember me?"

"Well, you do look familiar." And so did she. David remembered when he first laid eyes on her at Kimberly's office. Even as upset as he was, there was no way he could

miss looking at this hot little package. She was the epitome of the California girl with blonde hair, sun-kissed skin and brilliant blue eyes.

David wondered if he dropped to all fours and shoved his head under her dress, if his name would come back to her. "We met a couple of days ago."

"We did?"

"At your office. I'm Kimberly's brother."

"David, like the dog." Her smile relaxed and appeared more genuine.

"The dog, yeah." David couldn't help but shoot Kimberly a murderous look, although he had to admit it was his own fault. But still, he would have thought she could have come up with a better cover.

"Oh I'm sorry." Covering her smile with her hand, Cassandra blushed under his wary stare. "How rude of me. God, what you must go through having a dog named after you."

"Kimmie has a sick sense of humor."

"I knew there was something I liked about her."

All of a sudden David was in less of a hurry to leave the bar. "So what are you doing here?"

"I was driving by and decided to stop in. I've always wanted to come in and tonight I thought, why not."

"Ahh, you don't want to drink here." Especially smelling and looking as good as she did. David would have to neuter a few Weres tonight if they did.

"Why not?"

"The drinks are watered down, the beer is overpriced and the company is definitely something to be desired."

"I don't know." She eyed him with a secretive little smile. "I think the company is just fine."

"Hey, didn't I tell you to get out of here?" The loudmouth bartender was heading in their direction and David's hackles were on the rise. Not only did this guy piss him off just for being an asshole, the way he was looking at Cassandra made David want to tear him limb from limb.

"Uh-oh, did you get into trouble?" Cassandra teased.

"Guess I pissed off the wrong guy." David silently cursed his bad luck. Just when he thought he might be able to get to know Cassandra, he was getting thrown out in the cold and this dickwad was going to be coming on to her.

"I ain't gonna tell you again. It's time you left." The bartender had come out from behind the bar and the nearby patrons had stopped drinking and decided to enjoy the floorshow instead. But before he could retort, Cassandra surprised him by slipping her arm through his.

"Well, looks as if we better go. Come on." With a tug Cassandra headed back out the door, David in tow. Throwing a glance over his shoulder, David bared his teeth at the bartender.

Stepping out into the cool night air, David stopped Cassandra for a moment. "Hey, you didn't have to leave, you know. You never even got to talk to Kimberly."

"Oh it's all right. I think she'll understand."

David smiled, swelling with pride because this beautiful woman wanted to spend time with him. "Well, where do you want to go? The night is too young to end this early."

"Well." Glancing at her watch, Cassandra bit gently into her lip, something David desperately wanted to do for her instead. "I did skip dinner. I don't suppose you want to go grab something to eat?"

If he were eating between her legs, then David was all in. "I would love to."

"Any place in particular?"

"This is your city, you decide."

"Hmmm...a man who doesn't mind giving up control. I like that," Cassandra teased with a wink before walking away.

\* \* \* \* \*

The dinner was great, conversation flowed and three hours after they left the bar, David was pushing Cassandra's pants down her thighs. If he said he hadn't planned for this to happen, he would have been lying, but he'd been around the block plenty of times to know his plans meant jack shit. Women, Were or otherwise, made the call when it came to sex and anyone else saying differently were liars or fools.

Without waiting for a word, David pushed her down on the bed and quickly began to undress. When his pants dropped to the floor, Cassandra's gasp of surprise halted him in his tracks. Fuck!

In his haste to finally get a taste of her, David had forgotten one of the reasons he had stayed celibate for so long.

He was well-hung.

For him it was more of a curse than a blessing. Human women didn't handle sex with a Werewolf too well. David vividly remembered his first girlfriend who literally fainted at the sight of his cock. Normally a guy might think it was a good thing, but in his case, he knew it was a problem.

Hard as hell, David eyed her warily. Gone was the uncontrollable lust swimming in her eyes mere moments earlier. Now Cassandra stared at him with a look of awe and trepidation on her pretty face. "Wow."

"I was just thinking the same thing," he teased, trying to lighten the mood.

"You're huge."

"Because of you."

Cassandra chuckled roughly. "I'd say because of Mother Nature."

"You can handle it."

"You think?"

David wiggled his brows leeringly. "I know, but just to be sure." David dropped a kiss on her nose before moving down her delectable body. "I'll make sure you're more than ready."

As he settled between her splayed thighs, he stared hungrily at her glistening mound. Never before had such a delicacy been presented to him for his enjoyment. Sure, David had pleased woman with his mouth before but he could tell, just from the sweet scent of her arousal, that this time it would be entirely his pleasure as well.

Cassandra's bare pussy beckoned him forth and David was quick to answer its call.

She tasted as great as she looked. Her spicy flavor had his cock swelling even greater, desperate to enter hot pussy. David feasted on her luscious flesh, his tongue spearing into her hot, tight channel as she undulated beneath him. Yet he couldn't get enough of her.

It was as if her fluids were a river of aphrodisiac. Every lick, every drink from between her luscious lips, was better than the one before. The more he tasted, the more he wanted her. She was addictive and she was his.

"David... Jeez...oh my..."

David growled in response, as his tongue drove deeper inside her hot pussy. Still it wasn't enough. He had to possess her. Moving his probing tongue from her hot channel to erect clit, David eased his fingers into her slick pussy, taking up where his mouth had left off. He pumped his fingers with a rhythm that matched that of his stroking tongue.

"God yes..." she moaned. "Fuck me. Fuck me."

He had every intention of fucking her, but on his time.

David could feel Cassandra's body tightening around his fingers as he thrust them into her clenching pussy. She was close to coming. Her pending release filled his nostrils with the sweetest of scents, but David wasn't ready for her to come. No, this way was too easy.

He wanted her to work for it. To feel as if her body were breaking in two. He knew what she needed. Even if she didn't.

David pulled his fingers from her body, much to Cassandra's dismay. "What...don't stop!"

The desperation in her voice amused him. "Who's in control here?"

"What?" she asked confused.

"I said." David moved his soaked fingers to the pucker of her anus, gently teasing it with feathery-light strokes. Her body tensed as he pressed against her resisting entrance, but he wouldn't be deterred. "Who's in control here?"

"You are."

"Your sweet pussy, your luscious ass, they belong to me. For as long as I say."

"Yes."

"Say it."

"My pussy and my ass belong to you."

"And don't you forget it." He quickly moved his head down as he tilted her ass up and swiped his tongue against her rosette, coating it with a mixture of her juices and his saliva. Cassandra's cry of pleasure rang out around him as he stiffened his tongue and pushed it inside her tight passage, preparing her there as he had prepared her pussy earlier. His fingers soon replaced his tongue, one at a time until he had three pumping digits inside her, spearing her ass as he feasted on her mound once more.

Cassandra let out a moan so loud it almost sounded as if she were baying. Her body trembled violently as she came, screaming his name, hands digging into his flesh, marking him as he wanted to mark her.

David's own animalistic growl soon accompanied hers as he pulled his fingers from her tight hole and reared up his to knees. His need to fill her now outweighed every other need in his soul.

"Do you trust me?"

His words startled her. "What do you mean?"

Reaching over to the floor, David pulled his belt from his pants loops and brought it to her view. He rolled the belt on his hand, buckle flat on his hand, buried under the mound of leather. When it was wrapped until only an inch or two was left hanging free, David ran it over her flat stomach. "Do you trust me?"

"To do what?" The curiosity overrode the fear in her voice.

"To bind you to this bed and please you until you go mad."

Cassandra's eyes widened a bit as her tongue sneaked out to moisten her lips. "You're asking for a lot, aren't you?"

"Just everything you have to give."

"And then some."

David leaned over and took her hands into his, moving them one by one until they were over her head. He watched her the entire time, waiting for a "stop" or a "no". When none came, he slowly began to unwind the belt. "If you don't want this, say so now."

Cassandra's deep breathing was answer enough as he bound her hands together. She looked so submissive trussed up before him. So vulnerable. Awaiting his every command.

"You're protected, right?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure you want this?" He knew what her body was saying but he wanted to her say it aloud.

"Yes, yes, just fuck me. Please fuck me."

"I do so love the sound of 'please' on your lips." David gripped his cock in his hand, angling it toward her hot pussy. Cassandra tensed when he pressed his thick head against her and moved as if she were bracing herself for his girth.

Despite being aroused out of his mind, David held himself back, knowing if he didn't do this carefully, he could seriously hurt her. "Don't fight me," he warned as he pushed slowly into her trembling body. "You were made for this. Made for me."

The words came out of nowhere, but they felt so true because he was right. Her body opened up and took him into her depths, and it was better than anything he had ever felt in his life. The nectar from her warm pussy had been sweeter than honey and it had taken willpower he hadn't known he possessed to keep his canines at bay as he sampled her delectable delights. Her bare lips had him salivating and her tender clit had him aching for more. With her legs spread around his shoulders, David had felt free to feast on her flesh, but now they were face-to-face, he had to forcefully keep his beast at bay. One glimpse into his changing eyes would have her screaming in fear and David had too many other plans for her mouth to let anything happen.

From the tight grasp of her body, David knew Cassandra wasn't a woman to give her favors lightly and it made his conquest of her all the more sweet, and when he sank his full length inside her, he felt as if he'd died and gone to canine heaven.

The soft, downy bed made for the perfect mating place, cushioning Cassandra's fragile flesh as David filled her. His speed was quicker than he wanted and his thrusts were deeper than he intended, but David couldn't stop his hips from plunging forward.

"You feel so good, baby. So fucking good." She gripped him as no lover or hand had. So tight. So slick. So...his.

He wanted to mount her as if he had fur instead of skin. To power into her from behind with her soft ass pillowing his pelvis. The desire to sink his teeth into her was even more alarming. She wasn't Were. He shouldn't want to mate with her and mark her for all other Weres to see, but he did.

"Holy...my...ohh..." Cassandra had barely uttered a complete phrase since he had entered her. Instead, her passionate cries resonated in the room and in his head.

David knew he couldn't hold out much longer. Cassandra had come already and was on the brink again. There was no way he had enough control to ride out another one of her orgasms.

Just as her body plunged over the edge, her climax hitting her head-on, David surged into Cassandra one last time, deeper than he had been all night and released a torrent of seed into her body, but his seed wasn't the only thing he released inside her. Much to his amazement and horror, David's cock knotted. Her cry of surprise was no match for his own. He had fucked women who were not Were before and never had this occurred.

As his cock juttled spurt after spurt of semen inside her, David fought his beast, praying to all that was holy that he wouldn't hurt her, but from the sounds radiating from her parted lips, pain was the last thing Cassandra was feeling.

"Oh my God. What are you doing?" She whimpered beneath him, pumping her hips up for more. "I've never...never..."

"Am I hurting you?"

"Yes, but don't stop."

He couldn't if he tried. Slipping his hand between them, David zeroed in on her engorged clit, frigging her bud until she came again for him. It was the least he could do for all the pleasure he was receiving from her. When he thought he would go mad from being inside her tempting flesh, his bulb shrank and he was finally able to pull himself from her tight little body.

Collapsing on her tiny frame, David fought to regain his breath as Cassandra's legs slipped around his hips.

"Cass, you okay?" Damn, he hoped he hadn't hurt her. Quickly unbinding her hands, he prayed she was all right. He had never been so fierce, so unguarded with a lover before, and he'd hate like hell for Cassandra to have suffered for his pleasure.

"Hmbjask." David realized he couldn't understand a word Cassandra was saying and gently rolled off her body.

"Thanks." Cassandra's voice sounded breathy and sexy as hell and David winced when he realized he was already getting hard again. Damn unruly dick. Didn't it know when to keep its head down?

Smoothing her hair back off her face, David asked her again. "You okay?"

"Hmmm, better than okay." Cassandra rolled over onto her stomach, stretching erotically.

*Down, boy.*

"Good." Okay, that was a lame comment if he ever heard one. David realized he had always sucked at after-sex conversation. Probably one of the reasons he never had a long-term relationship.

Cassandra rolled back to her side, smiling a wicked little grin. "Good thing I take yoga and Pilates. I'll need to be flexible around you." Cassandra blushed prettily as soon as the words were out of her mouth and she rushed to make explanations. "What I meant to say is... I mean..."

"Don't worry, Cassandra, I won't get offended if you want me to hang around." David couldn't believe his own words but it was the truth. He was actually looking forward to spending some time with her and getting to know her better, in and out of the bedroom.

"I think we're going to kill my diaphragm," she teased, running her hand down his chest to his raging, hard cock.

Groaning, David felt his eyes rolling back in his head at her strong grip. Human or not human, he might have just met his match. "Or die trying."

\* \* \* \* \*

Nico sat in the dark of his office, contemplating the future of his Pack. Once the traitor was revealed and he defeated him, it would be Nico's job to guarantee the continuity of the Pack. This schism could not continue. He needed to ensure his Pack survived and continued. Which meant more alliances with the other Were animals.

Thoughts of the future made Nico think of Kimberly. He was so pleased she had finally allowed her beast to run wild. Kimberly was accepting her life as a Were and hopefully accepting her role as his mate would soon follow. He hated the idea of not being with her tonight, but once this business was done, he wasn't ever going to let her sleep alone again.

"Oh my God, is it midnight yet?" Remy stepped out of the shadows and began pacing in front of Nico's desk. He could tell she was struggling to rein in control of her beast. He'd had to talk her into the whole con game setup. Remy was more straightforward and confrontational.

"Remy, how are you supposed to be surprising the traitor if you're talking to me?"

"Come on, Nico, you can tell me. Who do you think the traitor really is? I know you have an idea."

"No, I won't accuse someone without cause. We will wait."

Remy flopped onto the couch and turned to stare at Nico. "So is Jace really coming tonight or what?"

"Yes, I told him he better come, in case the traitor is watching the compound. It's better to stick as close to the truth as possible."

They both turned at the sound of a vehicle pulling into the parking lot.

"Jace?"

"No, it's too early."

"Uh-oh, did we plan what we were going to do if the traitor showed early and decided to just shoot you in the back and not wait for Jace to get here?" Remy's sarcasm was evident in every word.

Nico threw her a withering look. "Will you give it a break? So I like to plan things."

Remy slipped back into the shadows, intent on surprising whoever walked into the office. However they were both surprised by a knock on the door. With a disgusted snort Remy flipped on the light and threw open the door.

"Oh look, it's Tweedledum and Tweedledee."

With sheepish grins, Kellen and Derek entered the room.

"What are you doing here?" Nico didn't know whether to laugh or be enraged. Did no one follow his orders anymore?

*"Benandanti*, forgive us. But we weren't going to leave you alone to meet Jace. Whoever has been betraying us might show up." Kellen's sincerity touched Nico even though he still wanted to kill both of them. If they fucked up this plan, they were dead.

"No shit, really?" Remy walked up behind the two of them and tried to knock their heads together. Of course she didn't try too hard because they easily eluded her.

"Hey, how come you didn't think we were the ones betraying you?" Derek dodged around Remy and she grabbed at him.

"Gee, I don't know. All the traitors I know are really polite and knock on the door before they kill their leader." Remy smirked.

Derek growled, batting her hand away. "I wasn't talking to you."

"What made you assume I didn't think it was either of you?" Standing up, Nico walked around his desk to perch on the edge.

"Well, we're not dead, for one." Kellen moved across the room to the couch against the wall. "And of course we knew it wasn't us."

"So you think it's either Harrison or Jackson?"

"Be careful how you answer." Harrison strolled in the room drawing everyone's gaze but Nico's, who was staring at Remy, bemused.

That about cinched it. No one listened to him. "Come on out, Jackson, I know you're there too."

Strolling into the room, the dark-haired wolf had the grace to look a bit sheepish. "I wasn't hiding. I was just waiting to make an entrance."

Remy snorted. "I told you no one would buy it."

"I bought it for a second," Derek offered, "but then you stormed out of the room."

"So..." Remy didn't seem to be getting the correlation either.

"You're too hotheaded. If you really thought Nico was calling you a traitor, you would have taken his head off."

"Or tried." Silence greeted Nico's statement. Fine, she would have possibly taken his head off but they all didn't have to act as if it were a given. "You're all fired."

"I haven't even gotten my first paycheck yet," Jackson grumbled good-naturedly, taking a seat next to Kellen.

"The pay sucks but the benefits are pretty good," Kellen added.

"You get paid? When did we start getting money?" Harrison asked with a mock frown.

"Will all of you just be quiet?" Nico shook his head in frustration. "I'm trying to catch a traitor here."

"And we're just here to make sure you don't end up dead in the process." Nico knew Derek meant well. Hell, they all did, but the trap wouldn't work with all of them sitting around bullshitting with each other.

"If it will help." Harrison pulled a small wire out of his pocket and presented it to Nico. "I think this will explain a lot. I did a little looking around after you all left and found this sitting as pretty as it pleased behind the mirror."

"Or you could have planted it." Derek smiled.

"I'm going to plant my fist in your face." He growled menacingly. "I'm no traitor."

"Of course he's not the traitor." Tired of the bickering, Nico snatched the wire out of Harrison's hand. "None of you are."

"Then who is?"

"The person who planted this for starters." Bringing the wire to his nose, Nico sniffed it carefully.

"Hey, why didn't you sniff it?" Kellen asked Harrison.

"At The Howler where there are fifty Weres a day stinking up the place?" Harrison shook his head before turning back to Nico. "So are you getting anything?"

"Just a confirmation." Nico was aware his statement had brought all the Weres in the room to attention.

"So you've known all along who the traitor is." Jackson sat back and slipped off his glasses, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Are you going to let us in on the secret?"

"I haven't known all along but I had my suspicions. The clues continued to point to one person but it didn't seem to make any sense."

"Okay, I can't be diplomatic like the great scholar here. Please, I gotta know." Derek's earnest look caused the rest of the group to laugh, all of them knowing he loved to be in on the latest gossip.

"It's Ryan. He bugged our meeting room and he's been relaying our conversations to the *Maggiore*. I just need to know if it's all of them or just a select few."

Nico stared out at his closest comrades, watching the various emotions play across their faces. There was some surprise, anger and resignation, all of them realizing no matter what they did or said, some Pack members were not going to agree with the way Nico handled Pack issues.

"Okay, I've been the good little girl, sitting in the corner while you all played Detective Clouseau, running around like a bunch of morons. I want to know what we're going to do with the bastard when he shows up?"

"Chill out, Remy. We're still waiting on Jace." Nico looked at the rest of the men in the room. "I hope I can assume you all didn't drive and leave your cars out in the parking lot."

"Oh *Benandanti*, you are a laugh riot." Derek pretended to wipe the tears from his eyes. "Give us some credit."

"Speaking of Jace, where is he?" Kellen checked the time on his watch. "It's almost midnight."

Just then the door was pushed open and Jace came in, closely followed by Ryan with a gun to his head. "Here's your *Rakshasa*, boys." The Weres all jumped to their feet, suddenly alert by the threat in their presence.

"Hey, Jace, guess you didn't see this one coming, huh?"

Jace turned toward Remy with a disgusted look. "This is sooo not the time for your smart-ass comments."

"I think it's the perfect time. I mean you're always spouting doom and gloom to anyone who will ever listen. But have you once told us something useful? I don't think so."

As Remy and Jace continued to argue, Kellen and Jackson cautiously began making their way around the room in an attempt to get behind Ryan to ambush him. Nico knew as long as Ryan's attention was distracted, they had a chance to overtake him.

"Please, just because I can't give the name of your future mate you're pissed at me."

"Oh you are so dead if this asshole doesn't kill you first. As if I fucking care who my mate is. I don't even want a mate."

Jace snorted in response and Remy made a move toward him in retaliation, causing Ryan to back up suddenly. "Both of you shut the fuck up. Now."

Everyone froze in place, not wanting to put Jace in any more danger. The only person who wasn't completely out of sorts was Nico, who looked on amused. "A gun. You're using a gun. For that alone I should kick your ass."

Remy snickered, angering Ryan further. "You think this is some kind of game?"

"Do you really want me to answer?" Nico shook his head disappointingly as he pushed himself off his desk.

"Don't move."

"Or else what?" Nico countered, walking slowly toward the shaking Were. "You going to shoot Jace?"

"Move faster," Remy chided, her comment causing the other Weres in the room to laugh.

"Bitch."

"Arf. Arf."

Ryan pulled the gun from Jace's head and pointed it at Remy as he edged closer to Nico's desk. "Maybe I'll shoot someone you care a little bit more about. Maybe then I'll get your attention."

Stopping, Nico raised his hands in mock surrender. "Is this what you want, Ryan, my attention?"

"No, I want to prove once and for all you should have never been made the *Benandanti*."

"And killing all of us is going to prove what exactly?"

"I don't have to kill all of you."

"See you're wrong there," Jackson said, moving a bit closer to them. "None of us will follow you. Neither will anyone else, once the word of how you sabotaged the real *Benandanti* gets out."

"Then I'll have to make sure it doesn't get out." Ryan suddenly realized the other Weres were closing in on him and stepped back, pulling Jace along with him.

"The Pack is not full of idiots, Ryan. They'll realize something was going on here. Just as we did." Nico's words were condescending.

"You didn't figure out shit." Ryan snorted in disgust. "Do you know how often I sat and laughed at how dumb you all sounded at your little secret meetings?"

"Yeah, guess you didn't realize we were laughing right along with you." Harrison spoke up. Nico wasn't surprised the Were had figured out he'd been planting a false trail for the traitor.

Ryan narrowed his gaze. "Right, you guys aren't that good of actors. I was there and I saw the way Remy and Nico were fighting."

"Ryan, please, this is a fool's errand. You've lost. I knew about your betrayal, I set up this trap and you fell right into it. Now, be a good little Were and admit to your actions. Perhaps the Pack will only banish you, instead of calling for your death." Nico was matter-of-fact and he could tell he was irritating Ryan. Of course he had no illusions Ryan would just walk away. Not that Nico would have allowed him to anyway.

"Lost, have I? Well, I'm not as stupid as you think I am." Ryan nodded at Nico's astonishment. "Oh yeah, I always knew you thought I was dumb. But guess what? We've got your little mongrel mate and you've had no idea."

Everything went still in Nico's mind. Ryan's word washed over him like a cold tide and for a moment Nico couldn't think. All he wanted to do was to react. His beast growled inside him, fierce and deadly. They had dared touch Kimberly, dared to say her name. There was no doubt about it, Ryan was going to die.

The tightening of Nico's jaw was the only outward indication he had heard Ryan's declaration. Inside he was frantically trying to contact Kimberly through their mental link but he could feel nothing. He felt as if his heart were slowly being pulled out of his chest.

Remy must have realized the extent of Nico's rage because she spoke, filling the sudden void in the conversation. "How do we know you're not lying? You could just be saying all this because you know you've been beaten."

"Beaten! I'm not beaten. And I'll never be, no matter what you do. Do you think I'm alone? I'm not the only dissatisfied member of the Pack. There are members of the *Maggiore* who support me." Finally, they were getting somewhere. Now if Nico could only convince this moron to tell him who, he could snap his neck.

"But they're not here, are they?" Catching Jace's eyes, Nico sent him a message.

*"Count to three and drop to the floor."*

*"She's still alive, Nico."*

*"I know. I refuse to believe anything else. Now count."*

"You're all dead," Ryan growled, no idea his time on this earth was numbered.

Jace went completely limp, throwing Ryan off guard as Nico went for the gun. As the Were closest to Ryan, Kellen charged at him, catching the mad Were off guard.

"What the —" were the last words Ryan ever had the chance to speak.

Kellen tackled him, both of them falling against Nico's desk. Unfortunately for Ryan, he hit the hard wood neck first and his neck snapped like a twig in the breeze.

"Damn it, Kellen," Derek grumbled as he pulled his companion up. "You weren't supposed to kill him."

"Consider it a perk." Kellen kicked Ryan to the floor.

"I can't believe you decided to pick an argument when he had a gun to my head. He could have killed me." Remy shrugged her shoulders as she helped Jace up. "I was considering it a perk."

Ignoring the entire group, Nico found the phone, which had been knocked off the desk, and frantically dialed Kimberly's apartment. Although it was a futile hope, he prayed she would answer. When her machine picked up, Nico slammed the phone down in despair. The thundering noise silenced the bickering Weres.

"Nico, we'll find her. We'll all help." The Weres all nodded their agreement at Jackson's words.

"Her brother. Let's try to find him and see if he knows where she may be." Remy sent Derek and Kellen out to the streets to follow-up on their contacts.

"I'm going to her apartment. Maybe I can pick up a trail." Nico knew he couldn't sit idly waiting for a call, if one were even going to come.

"We'll take care of the garbage. Go find your mate." Harrison and Jackson hauled Ryan out of the office as Nico left for the parking lot, Remy hot on his heels.

## Chapter Nine

Kimberly sat back down on the barstool and watched David head for the door. When Cassandra came in, Kimberly almost jumped off to go over and greet her boss but something stopped her. She wasn't sure if it was the seductive look on Cassandra's face or the interested look on David's, but when the two of them left together a few moments later, Kimberly was wondering if she'd made the right decision.

Glancing at her watch for the hundredth time, Kimberly decided this entire night was going to be a bust. First David left, and with her human boss no less. Now it appeared as if Nico were standing her up—again. She tried to be realistic and reasonable, figuring Nico had gotten held up with business at The Sanctuary, but she knew he had a cell phone, but unfortunately she had forgotten hers at home and had no way of getting in contact with him. The pay phone wasn't working either, and the bartender had growled rudely at her when she'd asked to use their phone, proving once and for all the world was out to get her.

She had never wanted to be one of those women. One of those women who relied on their man to determine their happiness. But here she was, sitting at a bar—by herself—waiting for Nico to show up. And she just knew if he walked in the door that minute, all would be forgiven and she would be asking him about his day and telling him about hers.

"Enough of this Ozzie and Harriet bullshit," she muttered to herself. If Nico showed after she left, he would just have to wonder what happened to her. Standing, she threw some money on the bar to pay for her tab and gathered her coat, preparing to leave.

"Leaving so soon?"

Startled, Kimberly turned around and almost tripped into the arms of the very last person she wanted to see. With clothes on, the older Were from the lake didn't seem as imposing or amusing. In all actuality, if it wasn't for his familiar scent, Kimberly would have never known he was a Were. He didn't give off the same glowing vibe everyone else seem to. He was weak and anyone could tell, even a novice, such as herself. Even if she hadn't been in a bar full of people, she wouldn't have been afraid of him.

He wasn't flanked by his cronies now, but there was still a menacing look in his eyes that warned Kimberly not to trust him. "Not soon enough."

"I'm Franklin, by the way, one of the members of the *Maggiore*. Nico didn't introduce us." Titling his head to the side, the older Were watched her with amusement. "I don't remember you being so feisty the last time we met."

"Sadly, I was startled by all the wilting flesh."

His amusement quickly vanished as anger filled his face. "Bitch in and out of fur, I see."

Was this the best he had? Kimberly wondered amusedly. She'd seen puppies with bigger barks. "Wow, you really got me. I'm going to have to rush right out and have myself a good long cry."

"You're awfully bold for someone in my territory."

"I'm not." Kimberly raised a brow. "I'm in Nico's."

"It's only his for as long as I say."

The words were meant to sound threatening but to her they merely sounded sad. "Somehow I seriously doubt it."

"You don't know anything," he spat. His anger poured out of him on to her and she could feel his beast stirring.

Taking a step back, Kimberly eyed him warily. He was weak all right but he also seemed crazy. And crazy was more dangerous than strength.

The Were smiled menacingly as he saw her back away from him. "It's about time you showed some sense. You better learn to know who has the power around here."

Kimberly didn't reply as there was nothing she could say to him that would make sense to his diseased mind. Better to just sit tight, listen for a moment and then get the hell out of there as soon as she could.

"Did Remy ever tell you I raised her?" The sudden change in subject confused her for a moment. He seemed to stare at her expectantly and she realized he was waiting for a reply.

"Ah no, she didn't. Poor girl probably tried to hide it from people rather than brag about it. She may work for Nico now, but she knows what her place in the Pack should be. She'll prove herself a true daughter of mine soon."

Kimberly knew she was trying to keep her mouth shut but she was usually a pretty good judge of character. She had no doubt this freak probably had raised Remy, but she also knew Remy was loyal to Nico and she wanted to tell him so. It wouldn't do any good though, since it would only start an argument and she wasn't willing to get into with him.

Franklin's eyes were shifting back and forth as he scanned the room before he turned back to her. "You know, when the power balance shifts, you'll have to come to me for favors. If you want to stay with the Pack and keep our protection, you'll be talking to me about it."

"All right, I've tried to keep quiet and play nice but you're just too much. It'll be a cold day in hell before I ever come sniffing around your saggy ass asking for help, so just get the fuck away from me."

Kimberly grabbed her purse and started to leave. Turning back for a moment, she added, "And Nico is going to wipe the floor with you when I tell him you even suggested Remy is disloyal, let alone when he hears what you suggested about me."

Turning back toward the door she headed outside, needing a breath of fresh air to clear the foul scent she had of the evil Were.

The crowd seemed to part as she stomped her way over to the door. Kimberly couldn't believe she had allowed the foul man to get to her. Just thinking about everything he said and implied made her spitting mad. Instead of threatening him with Nico, she should have eviscerated him.

*Yeah...eviscerate him then dance on his spleen.*

The vicious thought brought a smile to her face and a bit of a queasy feeling to her stomach. Not too queasy though, which kind of scared her. She was becoming more wolf by the day. But for the first time in her entire life, the thought didn't scare her.

It looked as if Nico were good for something besides multiple orgasms after all.

As she pushed the door open, a cool breeze drifted by her, filling her senses with the smell of Nico.

He was there after all.

Bastard. When she got her hands on him she was going to kick his ass...then give him a big kiss and a shove in the direction of Franklin so she could watch him kick Franklin's ass.

Damn, there it was again. Vicious and violent, would it ever end?

"It's all your fault, Nico," she called out as she walked out into the parking lot. "Hey, where are you?"

A quick rustle behind her, the entwining scent of Nico and another Were had her turning around to look behind her. But when she looked around, he wasn't there. Frowning, Kimberly tried to determine where the scent had come from when she felt someone at her back.

"Looking for me?" Before she could reply, a hand closed over her mouth and a sweet-smelling cloth was placed over her nose as her body was pulled back tightly against a chest.

Fear radiated through her body and she screamed in protest as she kicked out with all her strength. The cloth muffled her cries and her attempts at escape seemed to be made in vain. The grip on her didn't loosen, in fact her struggles only made her attacker pull her in closer to him.

Afraid, Kimberly could feel her beast rising to the surface, but before the change could take over her body, the fight went out of her and her body went slack. Her beast screamed in protest as she was swallowed whole by the darkness of unconsciousness, Nico's name a silent cry on her lips.

\* \* \* \* \*

The pain in her head was unbearable as was the silence, which seemed to surround the night. From past experience, Kimberly knew it was never this quiet unless a predator was near, but try as she might, she couldn't smell anything or anyone.

Easing into a sitting position, Kimberly tried hard to concentrate on her surroundings, but she couldn't make heads or tails of where she was. It seemed vaguely familiar, as if she should be able to recognize this place, but at the same time, it didn't feel quite real to her. The night air was thick with the smell of impending rain and the fog circled the trees like a waltzing lover.

Suddenly it clicked in her brain that she had been here before in her dreams, and now just as then, Kimberly could tell she wasn't alone. The crackle of the underbrush brought a relieved sigh to her lips as she turned her head and looked into the russet eyes of her lover.

It was going to be all right, Nico was there.

Padding out of the dark, he made his way over to her. Nico nuzzled her, sniffing as if to ensure himself she was okay. Kimberly reached up to pet him, sinking her fingers into his fur. Even though she knew she was dreaming, she felt safe and protected. There was a sudden warmth beneath her hands and instead of petting the wolf, she felt Nico's tense muscles.

"Ah, *Zingaro*, I almost died when I couldn't contact you."

Kimberly wrapped her arms around him, too choked up for a moment to speak.

Pulling back from her slightly, Nico gently wiped away the tear Kimberly hadn't even realized she had shed. "I'm so glad you're here. Even if it is only in my dreams."

"I will always be with you, Kimberly, just look here." Nico tapped her chest and the heart he had indicated melted.

"I love you, Nico." Kimberly had held back the words, afraid of what would happen when she finally gave in, but she was no longer afraid of having Nico in her life.

Nico's eyes flared at her declaration and he bent his head to claim her lips in a bruising kiss. Kimberly could feel the heat he was generating spread throughout her body and was surprised at how easily she found herself lying back with him covering her.

Nico suddenly pulled back, running his hand through his hair. "You would tempt a saint. And unfortunately this is not the time or place for making love. But when I find you and get you home, be prepared..."

Kimberly laughed breathlessly and pushed herself into a sitting position. "I'll consider myself warned."

"We don't have a lot of time, *Zingaro*. I need to know where you are so we can come get you. David is beside himself —"

"David's with you?" Kimberly couldn't help the trembling tone her voice took on. She wanted to go home.

"Yes, honey, he's here with me. Now tell me what happened after you left the bar."

"I waited for you for over an hour —"

"I never called you."

"Well, not you, but your secretary."

The bleak look in Nico's eyes spoke volumes. "I take it the call wasn't from your secretary."

"No."

"Oh." Really, what more was there to say? She had been a fool.

"Did you see anyone you recognized?"

"Franklin, the Were from the lake."

"I'm going to kill him," Nico roared, anger rising from him like steam.

"But it wasn't him. It was you." The memory came flashing back as Kimberly rose to her knees. "I smelled you."

"Wait a minute. Back up the bus. We know it wasn't me, so tell me more about Franklin."

Kimberly was irritated Nico wasn't understanding her but she knew it would probably take less time to just go along with his thought processes instead of trying to argue with him.

"I ran into Franklin. He said some nasty things. I got nasty right back. And then I threatened him."

"Threatened him?"

"Yeah, with you." Kimberly smiled at the thought.

"So I probably don't want to know the details of the nasty things that were said?"

"Let's just say Remy and I both got insulted and leave it be."

"Remy is going to love hearing this story. And don't think you're going to get away with not telling me forever." Kimberly just nodded as he continued. "So what happened next?"

"I left the bar and went outside. I thought I noticed your scent and followed it to the parking lot but you weren't there."

"I can't understand why you would be getting my scent. It's been hours since I was at The Howler."

"I know what I smelled. But then there was this other smell too, something sickeningly sweet. I struggled against whoever grabbed me but..." Kimberly hated to remember how out of control she felt and helpless to do anything. "Anyway, the next thing was, I awoke here."

"Do you know who did this, *Zingaro*?"

Kimberly shook her head sadly. "No, I never saw his face."

Nico frowned at her announcement. "Try to replay the scene in your head. I want to see if there was something you missed."

Kimberly nodded slowly, not really understanding how this would help but willing to do whatever Nico asked. Closing her eyes, Kimberly remembered walking out to her car, thinking she smelled Nico's scent. Turning her head, she suddenly noticed a

reflection in the car window of a man standing behind her. He swiftly pulled her toward him, covering her mouth with a cloth.

Scared, Kimberly opened her eyes. "No, I don't know."

Standing, Kimberly backed away from Nico. She didn't want to remember. She didn't want to ever see him again. "Just come get me."

"I need to know who he is."

"I can't... I just want to come home."

Nico jumped up and grabbed her arms. His fear and frustration wafted off him waves. "Show me then, *Zingaro*. Show me who did this to you."

Kimberly closed her eyes tightly, willing the image closer. She was there again, in the parking lot struggling for her life.

"God!" Nico's startled cry forced her eyes open. They were there. In the parking lot, watching the scene unfold before them. The image played out in front of them like a black and white vintage film but in three dimensions.

Kimberly could feel the breeze, the same one that had whipped her hair around as she walked through the lot. She could smell Nico's scent just as strongly as she had earlier when she had first walked through the parking lot. She could also feel the fear that had radiated from her body when she struggled in the grip of the mad Were.

"Show me," Nico urged. At his bidding, the image pivoted before them from front to back, revealing not only her frightened face but that of her attacker. Nico's quick intake of breath startled Kimberly and broke the image before them. Turning she stared at Nico who was sitting with a look of shock and disappointment on his face.

"Heath."

\* \* \* \* \*

Nico shook himself from the fog, which always surrounded him as he left the dream-walking state with a roar, allowing his beast to break free for a few moments. He was enraged with the knowledge that not only had someone from his Pack betrayed him, but it was someone he considered a friend and mentor.

Heath had been one of the only Weres of the *Maggiore* who had supported him in his bid for role of *Benandanti*. He had advised Nico at the beginning of his leadership, never pushing him but guiding him. Now to find out Heath was the traitor was especially infuriating.

With a rare show of temper, Nico jumped from the chair and overturned the coffee table, sending everyone around him running for cover.

"The bastard!"

"Who has her?" David's fury matched his own. The dark-haired Were had practically worn a path in the carpet waiting for word from his sister.

"Heath."

"Heath!" Remy stepped forward, her brow wrinkled in confusion. "Are you sure?"

"She saw him...I saw him." Explaining the vision would take longer than Kimberly had. Stepping over the rubble, which had once been the table, Nico headed toward the door.

"Wait," Remy called out, halting his escape. "What are you going to do?"

"Get back my mate."

"But you don't know where they are."

"I'll find her."

"We'll find her," David interjected.

Rearing around, Nico growled at him. "She wouldn't be in this mess if it wasn't for you."

"For me!" David roared. "This is your Machiavellian bullshit war she's entangled in. If it wasn't for you —"

"Boys, boys, boys..." Remy moved quickly between the two heated men. "This isn't helping matters."

"If they hurt my sister, I'm going to kill you."

"You can try —"

"Damn it, you two —" The door burst open just as David swung at Nico.

Acting quickly, Remy slammed her elbow into David's chest, sending him flying back into the wall.

"Don't make me kill...either one of you."

"What did we miss?" Kellen asked stepping into the room with Derek hot on his trail.

"Heath betrayed me."

"Heath."

"Yes, and we don't have time to go in to it again." Shoving her hand through her hair, Remy let out a frustrated breath. "Fucking men. We need to think, where would he take her?"

"Someplace he considers safe," Derek offered.

Kellen nodded his head in agreement. "Someplace reasonably close by."

"His estate." The answer was obvious, unlike the traitor himself. Nico could practically hear Heath advising him as a young wolf, "If there is to be war, better it be on your own turf."

Heath wanted an advantage. But he made a huge mistake when he took Kimberly — he left Nico alive.

David, recovered from Remy's attack, grabbed Nico's arm. "I'm coming with you."

Ignoring David, Nico addressed the room. "We're leaving now, let's go." As he headed out of the apartment building, the group of loyal Pack warriors behind him,

Nico stopped short at the entourage he encountered on the sidewalk. For a moment he thought Heath had sent a guard to destroy him but realized it was the Morbauch clan who stood before him.

"Our *Benandanti* wishes to speak with you."

"Tell your *Benandanti* I don't have time for diplomacy right now." Nico tried to walk past them but they continued to block his progress. He turned on them with a growl. "Don't make me send you back in a box. Now get the fuck out of my way."

Just then, the leader of the Morbauch clan stepped from the shadows. "I come to you with an offering of peace and a show of our commitment to this treaty."

"As much as I would love to sit and chat about our treaty, I just don't have the time." Nico pushed through the two emissaries and headed toward his car before the words of the Morbauch *Benandanti* halted him in his tracks.

"We know your mate has been seized and we are willing to fight at your side. Will you accept my offer of assistance?"

Reacting quickly, Nico picked Rachel up and slammed her against the side of the stair railing. Her cry of surprise was no match for the growls and shouts from behind them as her Pack moved in to protect her and his moved in to guard him. "Tell me what you know."

Without raising her hands to defend herself, Rachel spoke calmly. "We have been waiting and watching you ever since you initially contacted us. I've had guards stationed at The Howler and one reported a very unseemly incident, which occurred in the parking lot. When we heard on the streets your *Rahu* were looking for news of a missing female Were, I contacted your *Rakshasa* Jace and told him of what was witnessed."

"And I'm just supposed to believe you...believe this..."

"You can trust me."

"Or not."

"Or you can trust your *Rakshasa*." Rachel nodded her head in the direction from which she came. "He's in the car. How else did we know where to meet you?"

"I don't. But tonight, I'm not big on trust."

"Seeing is believing."

"And why now?" Nico asked, distrust rampant in his tone. "Why would you choose to join us now?"

"Because our mortality depends on it. We either fight together or die out altogether."

Releasing her slowly, Nico stepped back. "So you're not just another stubborn female after all."

"I have my moments." She smiled softly. "Now let's go get your mate back."

\* \* \* \* \*

The drive to Heath's estate grated on Nico's nerves. Realistically he knew they would arrive faster by car but his nature wanted to allow his beast the ability to run free. It would have been somewhat easier if he were in contact with Kimberly, but he hadn't been able to make contact again since they had left her apartment. Nico was worried it meant Heath was keeping her drugged and didn't want to contemplate the possibility too deeply.

"How much longer?" Nico knew Heath's estate was only a half an hour out of the city, but time seemed to be creeping by at a snail's pace.

"Just a few more minutes." Remy turned onto a side road and cut the lights. Thankfully, with their superior night vision they didn't need to rely on them to see where they were headed.

"What's the game plan?"

"We're going to rescue Kimberly and kill Heath."

"You know he's going to use her as a shield. We need a game plan."

"I can't think strategically right now. I just need to get to Kimberly." He couldn't believe that only a week ago he hadn't even contemplated taking a mate. Now, he knew there was no way he could live without her. He had given Kimberly until the full moon to admit she was his, battling her fears and worries so she would finally accept herself and him. Tonight was the full moon, the night he planned to celebrate the beginning of their life together and he wasn't going to lose her to a madman.

Remy sighed heavily but Nico knew he could rely on her to maneuver and run the troops. They could handle everything else but he was going to handle Heath.

Remy stopped the car a few hundred feet from the house and the other vehicles pulled in behind. Nico stared at the house, his eyes flickering as his beast pushed at the control he was barely holding on to. The estate was ablaze with lights as if every room were inviting them.

The full moon rested in the heavenly sky, devoid of clouds and stars. It was the clearest night Nico had ever seen, and it would have been the perfect night for a run at The Sanctuary and the rendezvous he had planned for Kimberly. Instead of making love with his mate, he was on a mission to rescue her and kill his mentor. Not exactly the way he had originally envisioned the evening going.

"I'm going in. He's got to be expecting me so there's no need for me to sneak in there." Nico got out of the car, purpose behind his every step.

Catching his arm, David halted him for a moment. "Look, he may be expecting you and even the *Rahu* over there, but he's not going to expect me and he's certainly not going to expect them." David thumbed over his shoulder, indicating the members of the Morbauch clan who were currently exiting their car.

"David, you and Remy are going to have to work this out. I'm headed in to find Kimberly." Nico began walking purposely toward the front entrance of the estate, blocking out all the extraneous stimuli around him.

"Zingaro, *can you hear me?*" Nico had attempted to contact Kimberly every few minutes without luck so he was surprised when she answered him.

"Nico, *where are you?*"

"I am here, Zingaro. *Are you okay?*" Nico prayed Heath had not harmed her.

"I'm fine. *I don't think anyone knows I'm conscious yet.*"

"Where are you being held, *can you tell me anything?*"

"I'm in a large room, similar to a library or den. *I think it may be in the back of the house, because I don't see any lights outside the windows.*" Nico immediately knew the room from his previous visits to Heath's home.

"I'm on my way, baby, just hold on." Nico had finally reached the front door and didn't even knock but kicked the door in. The Weres in the foyer all jumped to their feet, surprise written on their faces. Nico was a bit disappointed Heath had such inept guards.

And the sad part was he knew them. They were members of his own Pack, his own blood, betraying the brotherhood and their kin.

Nostrils flared, they faced off, ready to do battle. They had signed their own death warrants the moment they sided against him. The real shame was they wasted their last moments in life lounging around in the cheesy parlor decorated in outdated Eighties black lacquer.

"So you've finally shown yourself." Shaw, a cocky young Were with more hair mousse than brains, boasted. "Pity, I haven't had a chance to get to know the queen as intimately as I would have liked."

Before the words fully left Shaw's mouth, Nico pounced. With two swift punches, he snapped Shaw's head back and his neck, leaving the young Were dead before he even hit the floor.

The stunned silence was short-lived as the entryway spewed forth Nico's backup and the room around him erupted into rage. Wolves and coyotes filled the foyer with roars and howls as beast met beast.

It was more of a slaughter than a battle but Nico didn't take time to gloat as he pushed through the carnage in search of Kimberly. Not bothering to change, he darted down the hall as more of Heath's underlings came scurrying forth to join in.

With David and Remy covered in fur and fast on his heels, he charged up the stairway to the back of the house where he assumed Kimberly was kept.

The open door gave him pause for just a moment before he ran in and surveyed the room in his search for Kimberly. She sat tied to a chair, head lying limply to the side. And the man who had become his mortal enemy sat directly behind her.

"Nico, so glad you could join us. I must say I'm surprised you took care of the guards downstairs in such an effective manner. Ah well, perhaps it's best we leave this business to just the two of us." Gesturing to Remy and David, Heath added, "And your two loyal companions, of course."

"I'd love to sit and chat but I'm here to kill you, not have tea."

Ignoring Nico's comments, Heath continued his polite conversation. "I really must commend you on the loyalty you've drawn from the coyotes in such a short time. I would have never thought it possible. Of course, you approaching them was what precipitated these events in the first place."

"Okay, I'll bite, why?" Nico wanted to just transform and rip out Heath's throat, but as long as he was using Kimberly as a shield, Nico couldn't take the chance.

"I knew eventually you'd win them all to your side."

"Why is this such a bad thing?"

"The bloodline must not be broken," Heath spewed, for the first time showing real emotion. "We did not fight for you to sully our race with the blood of our enemies. It's a desecration."

*"And you thought my brother had issues."*

Nico's heart skipped a beat at Kimberly's sarcastic words. "Zingaro, you're back with me."

*"I never left, the bastard came in before I could make it out of the room, so I acted as if I were still out."*

"I'm going to get you out of here." Nico kept his face still as Heath raged, not wanting to give anything away.

*"So how long are you going to let him rant before you kill him?"*

*"Bloodthirsty little thing."*

*"The bastard kidnapped me, hello."*

*"Don't worry, Zingaro, I just need to find out who's all in it with him."*

Turning back to Heath, who had finally shut up about perfect bloodlines, Nico asked him, "You'd rather let us die out?"

"Yes."

"Then you're crazier than Franklin and the rest of your goons."

"Franklin." Heath snorted. "He is a weak old fool."

Remy growled low in her throat, inching closer. "I'd stay where I was, if I were you, Remington. Unless you want to see the insides of this bitch."

"I trusted you." Nico had considered Heath to be a surrogate father after his own was killed, so his betrayal was especially painful.

*"Got your answer yet?"* Kimberly's comments almost had Nico smiling.

*"Yes, I believe so."*

*"Can we go home now?"* Kimberly sounded more bored than scared. She was a hell of a woman. It was no wonder he was in love with her.

*"It was your first mistake,"* Heath sneered his reply.

*"And my last."*

*"Now, honey."* Before Heath knew what was going on, Kimberly quickly tilted her chair causing it to topple to the side. It was enough of a distraction for Nico, who quickly ate up the distance between his mentor and him. Nico transformed instantaneously, knocking Heath down and pinning him to the floor.

If the old ways were what Heath wanted, then Nico would gladly give them to him. Unable to admit defeat, Heath roared and brought the gun between them, giving Nico the last little push he needed to do what was necessary.

Looking his mentor-slash-father figure in the eye, Nico tore into his throat, growling in satisfaction as his blood spewed forth.

It was a quicker, kinder death than Heath deserved but it was the last thing Nico could do for the man who help make him king.

## Chapter Ten

The stress of the last few hours was beginning to take its toll on Kimberly. After the anticlimactic death of Heath, Kimberly barely had time to greet her brother and to assure him of her safety before Nico whisked her into the car and out of sight. Normally his caveman-like behavior would have at least earned him a raised brow and snotty sniff, but she was just so damn happy to see him.

"Where are we going?" Kimberly was dead tired and just wanted to sleep, but she was almost afraid to close her eyes. Afraid the nightmare of being held captive would haunt her dreams.

"Home, *Zingaro*, home." Nico glanced over at her before taking her hand in his. The warmth of his body infused Kimberly and she scooted over, laying her head back and drifting off to sleep.

The next thing Kimberly knew, Nico was carrying her up a large flight of stairs. "Where are we?" she asked sleepily.

"Our home." Nico's clipped answer caused Kimberly to open her sleep-laden eyes and look around. Okay, it was a nice house and everything, but when did his house become her house?

"So when did I move in?"

"Today."

"So am I ever getting anything but monosyllabic answers from you ever again?"

As he walked into a bedroom Kimberly presumed was his own, Nico gently laid her on the bed.

"*Zingaro*, I know I'm being heavy-handed and I'm sure I'll pay for it in the future, but for now, if you were out of my sight, I don't think I would be able to control my beast and a lot of people might get hurt. So you're moving in here today and never leaving again."

Kimberly chuckled and reached up, stroking his jawline. "You're very lucky, you know. Because I think I'm going accept the offer to make you pay in the future. So I guess I'll be sticking around."

Nuzzling his cheek into her hand, Nico remarked, "Not enough, little one. I want to hear the words again."

"Once wasn't enough?" Kimberly had waited too long to tell him she loved him.

"Once will never be enough." Nico dropped a kiss onto her upturned palm.

"I love you," she whispered, thankful she had the opportunity to tell him face-to-face. They had been blessed with a second chance and Kimberly refused to waste a moment of it.

But apparently for Nico, her simple words were enough. "And..."

Kimberly raised her brows questioningly. "And what?"

"And tell me I'm the mate of your dreams."

His serious tone was ruined by the slow smile spreading across his full lips.

"Literally and figuratively." Kimberly pulled a chuckling Nico onto her. His solid weight was a comfort to her still scattered nerves. He felt like home. The seriousness of the situation they had barely escaped from came crashing back to her. "I was so afraid I would never see you again."

Nico's smile slid away. "You're not alone."

"That man...he was someone significant to you, wasn't he?"

"It's not important."

"But he was...wasn't he?"

Nico sat up and turned, staring out into the bedroom. Kimberly gently stroked his back, silently urging him to talk to her.

"He was my mentor and friend. He helped me in my fight to become *Benandanti* and he was a surrogate father to me." Nico bent his head and Kimberly could sense the defeat he was feeling.

Getting swiftly to her knees, Kimberly slipped her arms around him and laid her head on his back. "He might have changed recently, Nico, but it doesn't mean he wasn't sincerely all those things at one time in the past. You have to remember those good times you had with the man you want to honor and not the man he later became."

"I'm beginning to wonder if it was all for nothing."

"Of course it isn't," Kimberly argued. "It wasn't just wolves I sensed tonight fighting with you, Nico. Whether your doubters admit it now or later, you've done the very thing you set out to do. You've taken the first step to unite the clans."

"To fight."

"To fight for their survival."

"You are too good for me, *Zingaro*."

Deciding this was the perfect opportunity to elevate the mood a bit, Kimberly laughed as she threw herself back on the bed. "Well, of course I am, silly. Now, what wonderful things are you going to do to me to make up for being so insignificant?"

Turning back to her, Nico's look smoldered. "Do to you? Don't you mean do for you?"

"You say tomato, I say tom-ah-toe." Spreading her arms, Kimberly invited him to do what he wanted. She had decided to embrace life fully, her life as a Were, as Nico's mate, everything.

"You know...technically the heat thing is over. We don't need to have sex anymore for my sanity."

"Fine, we can just do it for my sanity."

Kimberly giggled as Nico nuzzled her neck, causing shivers to rush over her. Twining her arms around his neck, she gently nipped at his ear.

"So you want to play rough, huh?" Nico ripped at her blouse, sending buttons flying.

"What big eyes you have." Kimberly reached up and unhooked the front clasp of her bra, slowly exposing her breasts to his hungry gaze.

"The better to see you with." Leaning down, he tongued her rapidly hardening nipples, bringing them to diamond points. Kimberly arched into his embrace, pushing the juncture of her thighs against his jeans-clad leg.

Palming her breasts, Nico pinched and tugged at her nipples. Kimberly let out a moan of desire as heat shot straight from her aroused tips to her now soaked center.

"I love to hear you enjoying my touch." Nico's rough whisper sent shivers down her spine.

"God, Nico, I'm burning up for you. Are you sure this heat thing is really over?"

Pulling back, he smiled wolfishly at her. "Oh it's over for now. You're just on fire for me, all on your own." Reaching down he unclasped her skirt and tugged it past her hips. Kimberly quickly kicked off her shoes as Nico jerked the skirt off and tossed it over his shoulder.

"What big teeth you have." Kimberly knew it was cheesy but she was enjoying the lighthearted lovemaking they were experiencing.

"Ah, the better to eat you with, my dear." Nico proceeded to divest her of her panties. Bending his head, he gently parted her folds and then swept his tongue along her soaked slit, ending at the tiny bundle of nerves and sucking her clit into his mouth. Kimberly's body jerked at the intimate kiss and she pressed her feet against the bed, striving to get closer to his teasing mouth. Nico alternated the licking and sucking, purposely driving her mad, never allowing her to come.

Nico's fingers slid inside her pussy, her juices coated them almost instantly. Kimberly's hips rocked slowly at first then harder with each thrust of his hand. She groaned with pleasure, urging him deeper.

"Nico, you're driving me mad. Please..." Kimberly whimpered with need as Nico removed his hand and abruptly sat up, pulling off his T-shirt. She reached up, sliding her hands along the contoured muscles of his chest.

"No more, *Zingaro*, I want to be inside you when you come." Nico stood and shucked his jeans. Kimberly pulled off her ruined blouse and slipped off her bra as Nico quickly rejoined her on the bed.

But Nico surprised her by rolling over on his back and pulling her atop him. "Ride me, *Zingaro*."

"Soon, my *Benandanti*, soon."

Sitting up, Kimberly straddled Nico's hips, enjoying the sensation of his hard, angular body beneath hers. As she reached between her legs, she gathered the cream there and coated his cock, mixing it with the pre-cum gathered on his purpled head.

"Stop teasing, *Zingaro*, and put me in your body."

"With pleasure." Grasping his cock firmly she guided it to her heated core and slowly lowered herself over him. Inch by inch, she took him until she was fully seated.

As she leaned forward to seize the headboard, Kimberly rocked her hips, slowly teasing them both. Nico took advantage of Kimberly's draped form and reached up to tweak her nipples. Kimberly moaned appreciatively at the attention and increased her rocking pace.

"Now who's teasing who," Nico whispered.

"I know, but it's okay because I'll get what I want."

"Without a doubt." Nico finally released her tormented nipples and clutched her hips, driving her to accelerate her speed.

Kimberly could feel the tingly tightening of her muscles and knew her orgasm was near. Reaching between her legs, she rubbed her clit, bringing herself over the edge. Nico growled and flipped Kimberly onto her back, driving his hips into hers. A second climax, close on the heels of the first roared through her body, leaving her limp. Nico's hoarse shout announced his own peak and his cock knotted inside her as he spilled his seed deep in her womb. He gently lowered himself to the bed, turning them both on their sides as their bodies remained locked together.

When Kimberly was finally able to regain her voice, she whispered to Nico, "What a big heart you have."

"The better to love you with, *Zingaro*."

\* \* \* \* \*

Smoke rose from the burning estate, filling the night sky with haze and ash. Standing in the shelter of the forest, Franklin watched the ebbing war with a jumbled emotion of satisfaction and sorrow.

He knew Heath's plan would never work. It couldn't. Obsession mixed with craziness was a deadly combination, even in the greatest of minds.

Franklin was so focused on the howls and gunfire he almost missed the sound of the car pulling in behind him. Almost.

Without sparing the driver a glance, he spoke. "You're late."

"Was this your doing?"

"It didn't work, did it?" Franklin snorted, surprised she would even have to ask. His plans always worked. This cluster-fuck didn't remotely resemble the havoc he was planning to rain on Nico's head.

"But...but you knew about it."

Her distaste annoyed him. She had no penchant for violence. It was something they were going to have to overcome.

"There's little that escapes me."

"Funny, because Nico seems to do it on a daily basis."

Shooting his daughter an aggravated look, Franklin bit back his scathing reply. If anyone else had even muttered those words, he would have had their hide but she was the last link he had to greatness and he wasn't ready to ostracize her just yet. Even though she was human, she had to have some of his DNA in her, although her human half was suppressing it. Unfortunately this was the risk he took when he slept with her slut of a mother. Too bad she didn't produce the Alpha male Were heir he had been hoping for. At least she was easy to control.

He had plans for her.

"When I'm ready, he'll come to me."

"Just as I did."

"Exactly."

With a shaky sigh, she ran her hand through her long blonde hair, the locks shimmering around her shoulders in the moonlight. Nervousness radiated off her like steam, filling the night air with its bitter taste. "I want out."

Franklin knew the words were coming before she uttered them. He knew it just as surely as she should have known his response. "Not going to happen."

"I don't want anything to do with your demented plan. Nico seems happy with Kimberly and I feel nothing for him. Marriage is completely out of the question now."

"I never spoke of marriage."

Startled blue eyes sought his in the dark. "I beg to differ. You said you wanted us..."

"To produce an heir. A rightful heir. And it's not too late."

"Unless you're carrying his semen in a turkey baster somewhere, I'm inclined to differ. Kimberly might be a tad upset if I try to partake of her mate's juice. And seeing how she can turn furry and I can't, I'm thinking she has the upper hand here."

"I'll take care for her."

"If you harm her, I walk." The finality of her words penetrated through his vengeance-filled brain. She was serious. "But not before I pay Nico a visit."

"Threatening me, daughter?" She was as amateurish as she was beautiful.

"No, bargaining for my life. I'm not you, Franklin...there's nothing here worth dying for. Or killing for, for that matter."

"How about the life of your child?"

"I told you, your plan for Nico and me will never work."

"I'm not talking about his child, I'm talking about the child you're carrying now."

Her shocked gasp brought a smile to his face as his gaze followed her hand to her womb. "What are you talking about?"

Silly girl. She knew nothing about the wiles of wars. "A new life carries such a sweet scent. Even one only hours old."

Franklin reached out to touch her but she stepped out of his way. "You're mad."

"And you finally carry my heir. It only took a little planning and the right little fertility pills to ensure you'd conceive."

"Fertility pills. I haven't been taking any damn pills."

"That Milla makes a mean cup of coffee, doesn't she?"

The shock on her face was damn near amusing. If he taught her anything, it would be to trust no one. "Milla..."

"Of course now that we know the little pink pills work, I'll have to give Dr. Traven a raise. I can give my Pack the one thing they need without interbreeding with those mongrels. Nico's plan will fail and finally *my* Pack will have the leader it deserves."

"If you're right...and I'm not saying you are, I'm not letting you near him."

"I'm right, all right, and you will. Where else will you go?"

"Away from you." Turning, she raced to her car, hand firmly planted across her middle.

"Cassandra," Franklin called, halting her in her tracks. "Do you really think David or I will let you escape so easily?"

"David has nothing to do with this."

"It's his seed growing inside of you, isn't it?"

Cassandra's eyes widened comically in her pale face. "You're psychotic."

"I'm a grandfather now, thanks to you." He grinned as she dove into her car and started her engine. This was only the beginning for them. He would rule the Pack. It was just a matter of time.

## About the Authors

Lena Matthews spends her days dreaming about handsome heroes and her nights with her own personal hero. Married to her college sweetheart, she is the proud mother of an extremely smart toddler, three evil dogs, and a mess of ants that she can't seem to get rid of.

When not writing, she can be found reading, watching movies, lifting up the cushions on the couch to look for batteries for the remote control and plotting different ways to bring Buffy back on the air.

Liz Andrews is an Ohio native who loves rooting for the home team. When she can manage to unlock herself from the ball and chain that connects her to the Internet, she enjoys reading, going to the movies and hosting dinner parties for friends. In the real world, Liz has an MBA and works in the hospital business. However, she much prefers to escape into the world of books. She has admired and read various writers for many years and is happy to have finally joined the rank of author.

Lena and Liz welcome comments from readers. You can find their websites and email addresses on their author bio pages at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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