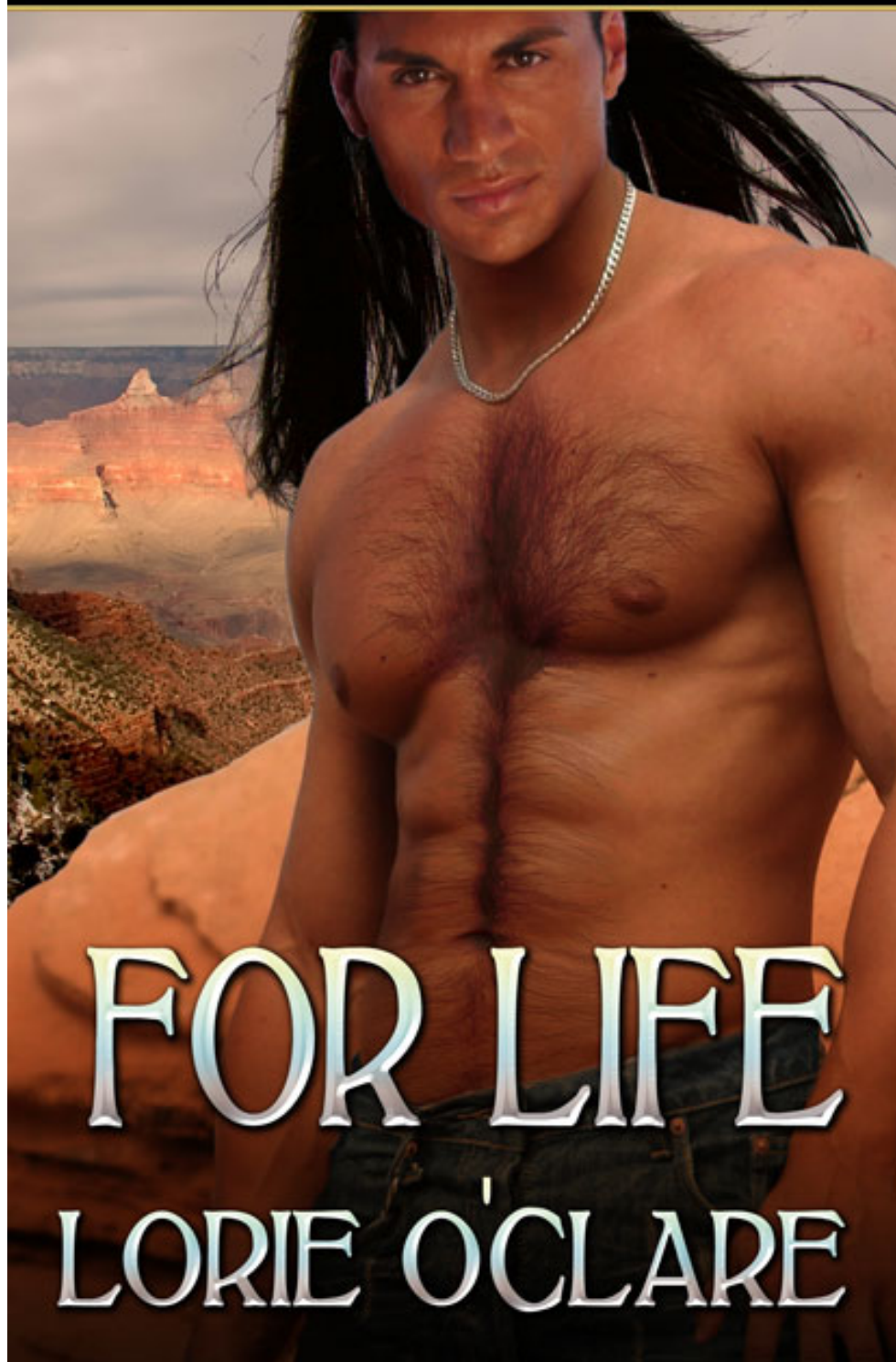


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



# FOR LIFE

LORIE O'CLARE

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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For Life

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# ***FOR LIFE***

**Lorie O'Clare**

## Chapter One

"I can't believe you'd ask me such a thing!" If Bob Abbey's face turned any redder, it would surely explode.

Maura Wagner lowered her head, quickly swiping at her nose so she wouldn't sneeze from the spicy smell of anger.

"I can't keep living like this." She balled her fists, then relaxed them, failing miserably at keeping her anger at bay.

Although she would get nowhere with her pack leader if she lost her temper.

"Do you think you're the first young bitch to learn that mating isn't an easy life?" Bob lowered his voice, turning from her and walking over to his coffee table. He picked up the remote, studying it while flipping it around in his large, thick hand. "*Lunewulfs* don't divorce. That is a human failure, and one we'll never lower ourselves to. How long have you been mated? Almost a year?"

Maura swallowed the lump swelling in her throat. "Almost six months," she said quietly. "And it wouldn't be a divorce. Just dissolving the mating. Bob, please, you've heard how it is between Pete and me. Everyone has."

"And that hurts your pride." Bob nodded, his expression softening. "But that doesn't mean you can't tame him a bit. Hell, Maura, we're all a bit on the wild side when we first mate. You asked me to let you out of this mating a few months ago. I'd hoped since I hadn't heard from you that you took my advice then. Maybe if I have you talk to some of the other bitches—"

"No," she said quickly, cutting him off, and then scowled.

Bob raised one eyebrow and frowned disapprovingly. A scar next to his eye puckered a bit and he stared at her with pity now overwhelming the spicy outrage that had filled the air moments before.

And there was nothing she hated more than pity. Well, maybe being humiliated, cheated on and beaten for no reason whatsoever. She hated Pete, despised everything about him. Talking about him to other mated bitches wouldn't make her love him. The damage was done. It was irreversible. If Pete swore to her tonight that he would never touch another bitch, never hit her and leave bruises for her to explain, she wouldn't believe him. It had gone on for too long—and she'd had enough.

"If Pete came to you asking to be let out of the mating, you'd consider it," she challenged, forgetting her lecture to herself to remain humble, respect her pack leader and keep the conversation civil.

Bob rubbed his thick hand over his forehead and blew out a sigh. "I am not going to dissolve the mating, no matter what. The only way a mating ends is if someone

challenges the male or the bitch for their mate. That is how we do things, how things have always been done.”

“Don’t tell me you aren’t willing to adjust pack laws and traditions for the benefit of the pack. You shunned Heidi...” She bit her lip, knowing she’d just brought up a forbidden subject.

Bob narrowed his gaze on her, the pity fading back into anger. She said something she shouldn’t have, something she’d sworn she wouldn’t bring up. Hell. Mentioning Heidi was forbidden. That was part of the shunning. And Heidi, her oldest and dearest friend, had been shunned because she’d fallen in love with the wrong werewolf—a werewolf who wasn’t *lunewulf*. Maura prayed her friend was happy. She hadn’t talked to her in several months, ever since Heidi had remained with Nicolo, her male, who was a Malta werewolf.

“As long as I’m pack leader,” Bob began in a voice so low and controlled that it chilled Maura’s blood, “I will always make decisions that are best for the pack. If I dissolve your mating, then any bitch or male who is having a bad day will beg to be set free.” He sliced his hand through the air. “That will never happen.” He bellowed his final sentence so loud that Maura jumped.

Avery Abbey, Bob’s mate, hurried from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dishtowel as she looked anxiously from Bob to Maura. Maura looked her way and straightened when Avery focused on the green bruise covering Maura’s temple—the mark Pete had left on her this morning for not having his breakfast ready. The smell of Avery’s confusion filled the air as she turned her attention to Bob. Her expression was lined with pity when she spoke quietly to her mate.

“Maybe Maura can help me with the meals I’m getting ready to haul around to the older members of the pack.” Avery moved closer to Bob and ran her hand down his arm.

He looked down at her, his hardened expression softening immediately. Maura would kill to have a male look at her like that. Bob focused on Avery, and with that quick glance he showed how much he loved and cared for her. That was a trait Maura doubted Pete would ever have—the ability to love someone other than himself.

Avery turned before Bob answered. “Come with me.” It wasn’t a question. And Maura couldn’t dishonor her queen bitch by refusing. Silently, she followed Avery into the kitchen.

For a few minutes, they were quiet while Avery returned to her task of slicing meat into small cubes and preparing a handful of plates. They would be delivered to the older members of the pack—males and bitches who could no longer run and kill for themselves.

“Tell me what is going on,” Avery said in her usual quiet tone after she finished slicing the meat.

The back door opened and a young pup, not old enough for school yet, let the screen door slam behind him as he focused on the smell of meat. His mother grabbed

his dirty hand, preventing him from pulling one of the plates off the counter, and handed him a small slice of meat. Her pup devoured it quickly.

"Go find your sire," she told her son, ruffling his hair and then giving him a pat on the back.

Maura waited for the pup to leave the room before answering Avery's question.

"Bob seems to think I can make Pete love me, that I can fix our mating."

"And you don't think you can?" This time when Avery looked at her, she intentionally avoided staring at the colorful bruise on the side of Maura's face.

Avery would never say anything that contradicted her mate. Maura moved to the stove and lifted the lid on the large silver pot simmering on the back burner. Green beans with large chunks of bacon filled her nose with their warm scent. Her stomach turned. In spite of having no breakfast, there was no way she could eat a thing.

"Most of them turn their noses up at vegetables," Avery said, sighing and then smiling. "But I have to try."

"Where's the ladle? I'll dish them onto the plates for you." She didn't feel like helping, although running supplies to older pack members was a common chore and one she'd helped with many times in her life. Maybe the charitable act would aid in clearing her mind, keeping it off the fact that by now Pete would be over at his girlfriend's house, more than likely gaining her sympathy over the fact that he had such a terrible mate while he fucked the shit out of the bitch.

Avery pointed to the drawer where kitchen supplies were and Maura helped prepare the plates.

"There are ways to help make your den a happy one." Avery pulled out a roll of foil to wrap the plates. "It's high time you started having pups. That often keeps a male around the den more. And when the pup comes into the world, males are so proud, strutting around as if they'd carried that pup for nine months instead of you."

"It's hard to get pregnant when you don't have sex."

Avery frowned. "Look at you. You are so pretty. You can't tell me that Pete isn't interested. Maura, try harder and he'll be a good mate. Pete Wagner comes from a very good den."

Which was exactly what Maura had seen in him when she mated him. He was respected in the pack, had a solid, good-sized den that was active in meetings and runs. Maura had craved the respect of a pack. Having never had a den to speak of and a mother who'd run with any male who'd sniff her way, she wanted the strength of a den that would smell of honor and love. She'd made a hell of a choice. Looks and smells weren't all they were cracked up to be.

She wanted to say she had tried, done everything she could think of to get Pete to stay at home and not sleep around on her. Nothing had worked. "I'm sure you're right," she forced herself to say.

"Good." Avery smiled, either not smelling Maura's lie or simply like every other member of her pack, not wanting to sniff her way too far into an ugly situation. "Thanks for helping me with the plates. And if you ever want to talk, please stop by."

Maura was being dismissed. And she couldn't have been happier. Assuring Avery she would stop by, Maura slipped out the back door and walked around to the driveway where her car was parked. Her pack wouldn't help her. No one would help her. She headed back across town, their tight, small *lunewulf* community business as usual on this cold winter day. The mountains spread like silent sentinels surrounding their pack, rocky and snow-covered and never budging. Once she'd believed the perfect male would be like those gorgeous mountains. Hard and solid, never swaying and always there to protect her.

Damn, had she been the fool.

The den she'd lived in for the past few months appeared clean and quiet when she pulled into their shoveled drive. Pete was all about appearances. They lived well, had a large house that his den helped buy for them and all the comforts she'd dreamed of having as a pup. In an odd sort of way, she had everything that should make a bitch happy. She had the respect of her pack, one of the nicer dens on their street, an attractive male who had a good job and provided her with new clothes and anything she wanted. Everything but love and respect and honor.

She worked all afternoon, preparing the venison just the way Pete liked it, and baked potatoes until the outsides were crisp. He whistled when he entered their den, his scent smelling of happiness and not a care in the world. It wasn't fair that she couldn't share those same relaxed emotions. Wiping her hands on her jeans, she glanced quickly around her modern-looking kitchen, noting the wiped-down counters, the waxed linoleum floors and the dust-free blinds that she'd already closed over the windows. There was nothing for Pete to bitch about—she hoped.

"Supper is almost ready," she called, then pulled out two plates and set them on the table.

"Well, since I didn't get breakfast, I didn't get a chance to eat until midday." Pete appeared in the doorway. "I can't say that I'm hungry. Not to mention being called by our pack leader after you paid him a visit didn't help my mood much."

The faint smell of another bitch lingered on his clothing. He didn't smell like sex, like he usually did. Maybe he'd whined so much to his girlfriend that she wouldn't put out for him today. But his last sentence and his hardened expression as he stood there glaring at her made her forget all about the girlfriend.

"You could have called and let me know." She looked at the meat she'd just pulled out of the oven. "I wouldn't have worked so hard to make this for you."

She intentionally didn't mention anything about talking to Bob. Obviously he sided with Pete on this and had called him to let him know his bitch had come to complain. So much for relying on her pack for any help.

"You don't work hard to do anything for me." Pete crossed his arms, his blue eyes turning pale and icy cold. "You sure do work hard when you go whining to our pack leader about how terrible our personal life is though. I can't believe you did that. You've dishonored me and our den. How do you think that makes me look?"

"What the hell am I supposed to do, Pete?" She was sick and tired of him looking at her like she had some kind of disease. "You spend more time with that bitch across town than you do with me."

"Oh!" He threw his arms up in the air. "You are so insane. I worked my ass off today for us, for our den. Then I come home and listen to you complain all night long. I should be the one howling like a pup to Bob, not you. But I tell you, there is no greater humiliation than having him call me while I'm at work and asking me to come talk to him."

Maura turned the oven and stove off. The conversation would get worse from here—she smelled it coming on. "What did you say to each other?"

"You thought you could spread your little lies through his den and no one would comment on the smell?"

"I didn't lie to him. And this bruise on my face didn't come from me being clumsy."

Pete shook his head as he studied her face. "You used to wear makeup. If you tried taking care of yourself once in a while, that wouldn't even show. Some might think you display my marks on you like a trophy or something. But no, you howl to me, and when I don't listen, you go and howl to our pack leader. Where is the love you're supposed to have for me?"

"Pete, you beat me and cheat on me. I should be asking if you love me."

"I adore you." He shook his head, putting on a good show of acting like he didn't understand why she'd make such accusations.

"You have a hell of a way of showing it."

"Oh. I'm about to show you, all right." He reached for her and Maura jumped backward, instinct kicking in quick and hard. Her blood boiled, the urge to change, to protect herself from a dangerous enemy taking over with a vengeance.

Pete laughed, lunging forward and grabbing her arm, then yanking hard enough to almost pull it out of its socket. Maura howled, digging her heels into the floor as he dragged her toward the front door of their den.

"What in the hell are you doing?" she asked when he opened the door and a rush of cold night air attacked her.

"I've had it, Maura. Absolutely had it." He hadn't taken his coat off. As he dragged her across the front yard to the car, she noticed it was still running. Panic attacked her and she fought harder. Pete had a plan, and it didn't smell good at all. He twisted her arm, pulling her to him and covering her mouth before she could cry out. "You will not make a scene in front of our den. In fact, you're never going to dishonor this den again."



"Pete. Don't do this." He pushed her inside the car and jumped in, hitting the automatic lock, then peeled out of the driveway. Maura reached for the door handle but he overpowered her, grabbing her wrists and pushing them painfully into her legs. Pete drove dangerously fast over the snow-cleared roads. Already he'd left their pack and his headlights cast beams of light over the twisting highway as he drove into the mountains. The car swerved hard around a curve, almost flying off the road. Maura screamed and he yanked her forward. She slid down before she hit her head on the dashboard.

"Like I said, Bob smelled your lies. They were so fucking obvious. He worried you were being unfaithful and that maybe I should spend more time at my den, keep an eye on you, work to keep you from disgracing me. How fucking humiliating!" he hissed, twisting her wrists.

Her skin stretched against bone and burned as he held her hands tightly together. "He didn't say that. I don't believe you."

"Oh believe me, little bitch. Believe me. The Wagner den is solid and strong. You were nothing—a bitch with no den, no history, nothing to offer me. But I fell in love. In spite of how my den warned me, how the pack warned me, I wanted you enough to believe we could make it work. And you've betrayed me."

Tears burned her eyes. Pete was absolutely insane. And there was no reasoning with insanity. Worst yet, she didn't smell any lies on him. If he truly believed what he said, she didn't stand a chance. That or he was such a damned good liar that he could keep them from stinking. She was inclined to believe the latter, but either way, his words smelled of danger, outrage—and it scared the hell out of her.

"What are you going to do?" That was all she wanted to know.

"The only thing I can do. Save face with my pack, with my den, and get rid of you."

"What do you mean get rid of me?" She quit fighting his grip. It only made her wrists hurt more. Relaxing, she listened to the engine strain as Pete took them higher into the mountains. Where the hell were they going?

"You're a disgrace to my den, to the pack. Bob will be sympathetic when he hears you've run off again, left me for your lover." His voice was so calm—too damned calm. He let go of her, putting both hands on the steering wheel when they took a sharp curve. "It was obvious all along when your bitch friend ran off with that Malta werewolf that you were spreading your legs for them too. The pity will be rank for a while, but Bob will end the mating, shunning you as he did that other bitch."

Maura almost fell headfirst into the dash when he angled the car around a sharp curve of the mountain road. She braced herself, fighting the change that begged to surface.

"You know there's no one else. I've been completely loyal to you." Her teeth pressed against her lips, lengthening as she spoke.

His outrageous comments sent a flood of emotions through her. Too many to keep in check and keep the change at bay.

"Yeah right. That's why you stunk up our pack leader's den with your lies. Even his poor pup was still complaining of the stench when I arrived. How often do I have to cover for you?"

"Cover for me?" Memories of the many lies she *had* told to protect Pete when he'd beaten her surfaced with a vengeance. "Pete, cut the crap."

He pulled the car to a stop, letting it idle for a moment while she quickly situated herself on the seat next to him. His eyes glowed the most intense blue. Once she actually thought him attractive. Now he simply looked pathetic and smelled even worse. She swore intense satisfaction made his face glow. It turned her stomach, a mixture of fear and trepidation making her scoot back against the passenger door.

"I am cutting the crap—cutting it out of my life. Get out, Maura."

She looked outside at the darkness that spread around them. "Here? Where the hell are we?"

"Outside our territory. That is, outside my territory." He stared at her for barely a minute before sighing loudly and grabbing her arm. Shoving the car into park, he yanked her out through his side. "I'm not joking. Your little game is over, bitch. I'm done with you."

He almost tossed her into the snow. She stumbled but regained her footing quickly. Pete jumped back into the car and shoved it into drive, fishtailing on the snow-packed highway as he sped off.

The first thought that entered her mind was that he'd have to come back. He would have to turn around in order to get back to their pack. But then it hit her. She was free.

Freezing. Outside in the dark and the cold with no food or coat, she barely noticed her body shiver. She stared up and down the quiet, abandoned-looking highway, not sure whether to laugh out loud or stomp her feet in anger. He would disgrace her before their pack, spreading lies that she had no doubt he'd get their entire pack to believe, probably not making one little falsehood stink.

She stood in the narrow tire track on the highway where their car had smashed down the snow. Shedding out of her clothes quickly, she fought the frigid night air as her teeth instantly started chattering. It took longer to get out of her boots with her hands shaking.

This had to be a godsend. She forced herself to look at it that way as she tied her clothes around her neck while her fingers could still manage the simple act. Already the change demanded freedom. She would freeze to death without her coat, but her thick hide and warm fur that begged to pop free from her skin and protect her from the elements would keep her warm.

Her vision changed, turning the blackness around her to different shades of gray. Suddenly all the smells surrounding her were easy to detect. Carbon monoxide from the car, a nearby waterfall, the freshness of untouched snow.

And as her bones popped and stretched, the sweet pain attacked her and she embraced it. Howling at the black sky above her, she dropped to all fours, no longer

feeling the cold or the unbearable weight on her shoulders that she'd held on to for over six months now.

No matter all the lies that Pete would share with her pack, she believed him in this. Believed that he'd kicked her out and that she was free. Turning, she bounded away from the highway, heading in the opposite direction of her pack, although for the life of her, she had no idea where she would go.

## Chapter Two

Josie Balzon stood on the edge of the mountain, sniffing the air while he searched for the thoughts that he'd heard earlier. They didn't make any sense, but if he'd learned anything in his thirty-six years, it was that he could trust the gift. It led him, pulled him toward the edge of their pack. A cold morning breeze swept over his long black coat, but he barely felt it.

*Talk to me again, little bitch.* Where the fuck was she? He knew what he had heard, and he wanted to hear it again.

Taking a morning run like he usually did helped him hear the pack, see into their minds and find trouble before it found him. Since moving into the Rocky Mountains, he also searched for conspiracies, for anything that would slow the evolution of their growing pack. Because nothing would take away the territory the Malta werewolves finally could call their own.

*Talk to me.* He searched the valley below him, the mounds of drifting snow, the sparkling branches that hung heavily with icicles and the pale gray sky that went on forever past the surrounding mountains. Everything was still—and cold. And a bitch shouldn't be out here by herself.

But she was. He had heard her thoughts when he headed up the mountain. She whispered them in his mind as if she stood right next to him. And in spite of their sultry, beckoning tone, the underlying urgency made it clear that she didn't know where she was or what she was doing here.

Her mind called out to him and then went silent. Frustration hardened every muscle inside him.

Josie leapt off the side of the cliff, pushing with his hind legs, and for a moment while he was airborne, he experienced unleashed power. He inhaled deeply, catching the frozen air and filling his lungs with it. He hit the ground hard, running a few yards and then slowing, maintaining his balance on the snow and ice. Everything around him was still, white with a fresh blanket of snow. Snow that reached up to his shoulders in the deeper drifts soaked his long black coat, but he didn't give a rat's ass. His hide was thick enough to keep out the cold, and the snow didn't deter him from searching the area and listening with his mind.

Squinting against the glare surrounding him, he took in the large clearing. Mountains reached for the sky on either side of him. This land was fucking beautiful—dangerous and so incredibly untamed, but gorgeous. Malta werewolves thought themselves cursed when they'd first arrived in this territory. After five years of being scattered around the world, fleeing from Malta when their pack had been burned by

other packs who feared and hated them, they had become suspicious and leery of anyone offering them anything.

But Josie saw this land as a blessing. They were united as a pack, given the opportunity to grow and once again be strong and powerful. Most of them would have to acclimate to the climate, but he fucking loved it here.

He turned, glancing up at the cliff he'd just jumped from. Shit. Thoughts screamed at him from another one of his packmates—an all-too-familiar and annoying male growl that he could live without hearing today. Fucking Dante. He had sniffed out Josie's actions, pried into his mind and turned into a damn drama king, calling out reinforcements to stalk Josie, chase him down and howl at him for doing something he hadn't even done yet.

No one other than Dante came close to matching his strength with the gift.

*Bastard. Return to your den and keep your nose out of my business.* He growled as he sent the thought, even though no one would hear him out here.

He straightened, walking farther into the snow-covered valley, searching his surroundings and fighting to keep the thoughts of his approaching pack members out of his head so he could find the one that had called him out here in the first place.

Damn it. No matter how hard he tried, his pack members' thoughts grew stronger. Dante and his mate, Moira, and Nicolo and his *lunewulf* mate, Heidi, got closer. Fuck Dante for climbing into his mind and deciding Josie was out of line.

Then he heard the thoughts from the female bitch who called out with her mind, even though she didn't know she was doing it. Her thoughts were quiet, barely audible in his mind, but reaching out as if stretching slowly and lazily from a deep slumber. He looked at the surrounding trees and rocks. A cold breeze rushed through the frozen pines, dumping a spray of sparkling snow around him. For a moment everything was white.

*Where are you? Who are you? Little bitch, talk to me.* Talking to her in his mind wouldn't work. He doubted she possessed the gift. But he tried anyway. The air was frozen and burned his lungs when he inhaled deeply, trying to sniff her out. He didn't sense pain or fear. Whoever was out here didn't know he was here. But she was nearby—real fucking close.

But where?

He lifted his paws high, almost prancing through the deep snow as a sense of urgency hit him. He had to find her before his pack members closed in. The wind hit again, parting his coat as it whipped wickedly around him. But that cold air brought a new scent. He grabbed it, his insides hardening with excitement. He smelled her. A sweet, musky aroma that had led him across the valley to the spot where she lay hidden.

Fuck his pack members for narrowing in on him. There wasn't any reason to look over his shoulder. The three Malta werewolves and one *lunewulf* bitch were almost to the cliff. They were tracking his scent, and a couple of them were in his damned

thoughts. Josie focused on the bitch's scent. Her thoughts were warm, comfortable, like she was at peace with the world.

Goddamn. He heard her in his mind as if she was right next to him. But all that surrounded him was fucking snow. Her thoughts were growing more coherent, as if she'd been asleep and had just woke up, her mind slowly focusing on where she was.

But what the hell was she doing out here? She hadn't thought about that yet. He had no way of knowing—that was, no way of knowing until he found her.

*I could stay in this cave for the rest of my life.* Her quiet thoughts tortured his mind.

A cave! He searched the mountain spreading in front of him. Then he took off in a hard run, ignoring the telepathic orders coming from Dante to wait until they'd reached him.

*I know what you're doing, but whoever is out there will be scared shitless when you pounce on her.* Dante's cocky attitude and all-knowing accusations didn't faze Josie for a moment.

*Stay where you are,* he ordered Dante, using his thoughts to speak to his pack member. Of the four of them now standing on the cliff, watching him race across the meadow, Dante and his mate Moira were the only ones with the gift. A precious blessing from their previous pack leader graced some of them with incredible talents. Since he was a pup, Josie could hear others' thoughts and move things with his mind. Moving Dante to the other side of their territory sounded damned appealing at the moment.

Nicolo and Heidi smelled the concern and aggravation wrapped around Dante and his mate and reacted to it. But they didn't have a fucking clue what was going on. Neither of them possessed the gift.

And Josie had no intention of waiting for them or enlightening them as to what he planned on doing next. All that mattered now was that he find the bitch, who for reasons yet to be determined was sleeping in a cave.

Her thoughts turned sour, suddenly bitter. *God. What a loser! What the hell did I ever see in him? He'll ruin me, destroy my reputation and probably have me fucking shunned. And all I did was endure his abuse and infidelity.*

Shit. He reached the edge of the mountain and looked up at the large boulders almost buried in snow and followed her thoughts. As they grew sharper, like a soft whisper in his head, they also made less and less sense. What the fuck was she thinking?

He leapt up onto a large flat rock, more like a ledge, fighting not to slip on an ice patch. Her scent surrounded him. He had to be right on top of her. Only one way to find out. Josie growled, letting it rumble through his chest and grow in volume as it ripped past his throat. He followed it with a sharp bark, demanding and determined. And he got the reaction he'd expected.

The air filled with the smell of fear. She heard and smelled him. He was damned close.

*Shit. Oh God. There's nowhere to run. I've got to run.* Her thoughts attacked him in a panicked frenzy.

His mood soured instantly. He didn't like how she smelled when she was upset. Her first thoughts—those that had pulled him from his warm den less than an hour ago—had been so soft, sensual, relaxed and beautiful. But now the bitch's tone had darkened, prickled, her defenses in high gear. The moment she saw him she would attack with tooth and claw.

He walked over the icy, snow-covered rocks, circling around sharp boulders and climbing carefully. His little bitch had gone to some effort to find a perfect hiding place. If it weren't for her thoughts unconsciously calling out to him, he never would have found her.

And he'd done that just now.

Although he hardly call the overhang, surrounded by walls of snow, a cave. But as he stared into the most beautiful almond-shaped silver eyes he'd seen in a long time, every protector's instinct inside him surfaced with a vengeance in spite of her curled lip and dagger teeth pressing against her glossy white coat.

Josie moved in on her, inhaling her enticing scent, and ignored her outrage and fear.

*You have nothing to worry about, little bitch. You are way too fucking hot to be harmed.* He knew she didn't hear his thoughts.

But Dante and Moira did.

*Lay a paw on her and I'll kick your fucking ass.* Moira thought she could bully him into submission.

He tried pushing her out of his head, which proved harder to do when he heard them huffing up the side of the mountain, right on his damned tail. Josie lowered his head, unwilling to relax too much in front of the beautiful *lunewulf* who pressed herself against the rock behind her, cornered and freaking out. He would hear her story, learn what brought her here and why she believed her pack would turn their tails on her.

As he watched her, aware of her gaze shifting, looking past him when his packmates appeared, a memory hit him. She was afraid that her pack would shun her. Nicolo's mate, another *lunewulf* bitch, had been shunned when she agreed to take Nicolo as a mate. Her pack had turned their tails on her.

He remembered that day. It had been a couple months ago. The *lunewulf* pack leader had shown up at Dimitri's den with teeth bared. He had a posse with him, and they were there to retrieve their bitches. Heidi had a friend with her—a beautiful, sexy and abused-looking bitch.

Josie stared into the silver eyes of the bitch shivering in front of him. She growled and then barked fiercely. Her hackles rose when Dante and Nicolo appeared on either side of him. Fury and panic enveloped her. She was no match against him, let alone the three of them.

Josie didn't move when someone pushed hard against him. He finally pulled his gaze from the terrified *lunewulf* bitch when someone bit his thigh.

*Ouch. Bitch.* He turned and looked at Heidi, who fought to push past him, and growled in protest at her abuse.

Nicolo snarled, backing his bitch's actions. Josie ignored his sudden ill temper. The bitch bit him. What the fuck did Nicolo expect Josie to do?

He moved, just a bit, and Heidi leapt in front of the three males, jumping on the other *lunewulf* bitch and scaring the crap out of her.

She attacked quickly, but then just as fast stopped, whimpering and barking at the same time, her emotions hitting him worse than an avalanche.

*Heidi! Oh God, I thought I was dead, or worse. I prayed you were happy but I wasn't sure. God! You are so damned lucky.* Her thoughts filled his head as the two bitches circled each other, licking and whining as they did a small dance in front of the Malta werewolves. Josie and the others stood silently, allowing the two of them their space. He had no doubts now who this *lunewulf* bitch was. Her name escaped him, but he shifted his attention to Heidi's thoughts too, working to catch as much as he could from both of their minds to piece together the mystery that had pulled him out here to the edge of their territory.

*You sniffed me out. I can't believe you're here. I really thought I wouldn't be able to find you.* The little bitch circled around Heidi, causing snow to fall from the rocks and shower around them like a fine, sparkling white mist.

*Maura. Shit. What the hell has happened to you? Sleeping in a cave? This far from our pack—I mean your pack. We've got to take you back to my den so we can talk.* Heidi helped create the merry-go-round of white fur as the two bitches circled each other, excited and yelping and barking.

Well, at least he figured out her name.

Maura's sleek body was damp from snow falling on her and from Heidi's excited licks. *Lunewulfs* were a much smaller breed than Malta werewolves. He liked her petite size, how slender yet firm her body was. Watching the two females dance around each other and sensing Maura's fear fade into happier emotions had him curious about one thing. What would they do with her now?

Josie had no problem coming up with a few possibilities. In her fur or her human form, Maura was hot as fucking hell.

Dante gave him a sidelong glance and at the same time Moira growled behind them. Heidi and Maura stopped dancing, misinterpreting Moira's disgust and guessing their small reunion had ended. Heidi nipped at Maura and then moved through the males. Josie stepped to the side, watching Maura as she walked past him. Moira and Heidi sidled up alongside Maura, offering an escort down the mountain and through the valley.

*I say we take her to our den.* Apparently Dante had decided it was time for telepathic conversation.



*Like hell. You two would scare the shit out of her. What he'd like to do is apply the finders, keepers rule.*

*She sure as fuck isn't going back to your den. Already she's in trouble with her pack. You want to make it worse?* Dante had no problem digging deeper into Josie's thoughts to learn his feelings on the matter. The werewolf never hesitated in pushing a situation, even if it pissed on someone's privacy.

*Well, Josie could play the same damned game. Nicolo and Heidi don't have the gift. And already they're fighting to be accepted by our pack. If he brings another lunewolf bitch into his den, it will make things harder on them.*

*And you're an unmated fucking single male. I know what you want to make hard for her.*

*Sounds like a damned good plan. We go to my den. We'll discuss matters further there. Besides, my den is closest and the rest of the pack won't see her.* He'd chosen the remote location for his den intentionally when their pack first moved here. They were a blessed race, a good many of them able to use their minds to do things that other werewolves couldn't. But those in their pack who didn't have the gift got nervous around those who had it. Josie's den was somewhat isolated, farther up the mountain from most of the pack. It gave him the freedom to enjoy who he was without watchful eyes judging him. Sometimes hearing everyone's thoughts was a bitch.

Josie barked at Nicolo, one of the few werewolves in the pack who really didn't care that he possessed none of the gift. Nicolo looked over the bitches at him and Josie nodded and then led the way to his den. They slowed when they reached his yard, and Josie pushed open his door, nodding to the bitches to enter and change. The males changed outside, a gesture of respect offered simply because a stranger was in their midst.

In spite of the frigid temperatures, Josie's body burned inside as the change pumped through him. Muscles altered and bones popped and transformed so they could hold his human frame. His vision blurred momentarily as images changed, his senses dulling as his acute animal awareness faded.

Cold sweat clung to his human flesh as he straightened onto two legs. Instantly shivering so damned hard he could hardly move, Josie struggled to untie his clothes that were twisted around his neck and then hurried to dress in the freezing cold.

"Heidi!" Nicolo bellowed the second his mouth could form words. "What the hell is going on here?"

Josie led the way into his den, anxious to hear the answer to that question. He stopped as he stared at Maura, who stood in the middle of his living room. She pulled a sweater over her head, and for a moment, he saw her body stretched before him, her arms over her head while she struggled with her clothes. Full, plump breasts with nipples puckered into hard little nubs made his dick hard as a rock.

All thoughts of cold left him, even though there was no fire going in his fireplace and his den wasn't much warmer than it was outside.

The material slid over her breasts and she tugged on her sweater, offering yet another magnificent view when her nipples almost poked through the knitted wool. Her gaze went straight to him when he approached her. The silver in her deep blue eyes hadn't completely faded. Instead of almond-shaped, they were now large and round and full of curiosity. Her mind pulled forward memories of their first meeting when she'd last been in his pack.

"How did you find me?" She had a soft, sensual tone, not quite a whisper but sultry, like the rest of her. Every bit of Maura was made for the bedroom—a perfect little seductress.

"Your thoughts woke me up," he said simply and then walked over to the box next to his fireplace and started stacking wood for a fire.

"God, Josie. Scare the crap out of her, why don't you?" Dante growled.

"I don't lie."

Moira snapped at him and Dante in her head but then ignored both of them when she turned her attention to the pretty blonde bitch. "Are you okay?" she asked Maura.

"Maura." The anxiety in Heidi's soft tone added to the tense energy rushing around the room. "Did it get that bad?"

"I'm not going back," Maura said quietly. "I can't."

Nicolo blew out a deep breath. His littermate, their pack leader, would be pissed as hell to find yet another *lunewulf* bitch in their midst. Dimitri could damn well get over it. Josie forced everyone's thoughts out of his head and shifted his attention to Maura as he struck a match and ignited the newspaper he'd stuffed under the wood in his fireplace. Flames soared to life.

"No one is going to hurt you." He told her the one thing that he knew she worried about more than anything. Her own pack created panic and worry inside her, and being in his pack scared her to death. "I want you to know that," he added, turning around to see her staring at him, giving him an odd and curious look.

"We need to decide what to do with her." Dante rubbed his chin, staring at the floor as he spoke.

"She's staying here." Josie gave the words finality. He knew they'd argue, but he didn't really care. Unless Maura threw a fit, she wasn't going anywhere.

He would dwell on the whys of his decision later.

"She can't stay here," Heidi cried out, then turned on her mate. "Tell him she can't stay here." Before Nicolo could get a word in edgewise, Heidi waved her fingers at Josie. "He's a single male. Obviously Maura is already in trouble."

"Do I need to remind you where you spent your time when you first entered our pack?" Josie growled at Heidi.

Nicolo grabbed his mate, shoving her behind him and giving Josie a hard look.

"I am a mated bitch." Maura didn't look at any of them, but twisted the bottom strands of her long blonde hair that had tumbled over her shoulder.

Dante and Moira argued using their thoughts, which quickly got on Josie's nerves. Right now, all he wanted to focus on was Maura's thoughts, and they were getting tangled up with everyone else's in the room.

"I appreciate all of you helping me find Maura." Josie moved to his door, opening it and letting the cold rush in. "I'll call you and let you know what she decides to do."

"You're going to deal with Dimitri on this one," Nicolo told him, still holding Heidi at his side.

"I have no problem dealing with him." Josie had known their pack leader most of his life. Dimitri's temper hadn't bothered him when they were pups, and it didn't faze him now that the werewolf was their pack leader.

"Maura? You can come with us, if you want." Heidi searched Maura's face, her worry for her friend obvious from her expression as well as her thoughts.

Josie fought a smile when Heidi worried that he would try to seduce Maura the second they were all gone.

"My reputation can't be tarnished any worse than it already is," Maura said quietly, then reached out and touched Heidi's arm.

Heidi pulled away from Nicolo and the two bitches hugged each other affectionately. Josie had never blamed Nicolo for fighting so hard for Heidi. She was a pretty bitch, with guts and intelligence. But she didn't hold a flame to Maura. The young bitch, probably thirty or so if he had to guess, had curves in all the right places—full breasts, nicely rounded hips and a perfectly shaped ass. Shit. He could grab on to that ass and spread her legs and make her fucking scream.

*That does it. We're not leaving her with him,* Moira thought with disgust.

Josie swore Dante chuckled in his thoughts.

"Goodbye," Josie told them, and silently told Moira that if she didn't like his thoughts she should stay the fuck out of his brain.

Dante growled at him as he headed outside, pushing Moira ahead of him. Josie met the werewolf head-on, staring deep into his hard gaze. There wasn't a damned thing Dante could say or think that would control Josie's actions. He let him know as much with that one stare.

"Call if you need anything." Heidi spotted a pen on the coffee table and quickly jotted her cell phone number on the werewolf directory that their pack had finally gotten organized enough to compile. "That's Nicolo's and my cell number."

"Thanks, and I will." Maura hugged herself against the cold, but didn't relax any when Josie shut the door on his pack members and turned to face her.

"What did you mean when you said my thoughts woke you up?" Although she looked ready to leap out of the way if he stepped toward her, curiosity and definite interest dominated her thoughts.

There was nowhere she could run. He moved in closer, inhaling her scent. "It's not every day I hear a bitch this far up the mountain," he told her. "I needed to know that you were all right."

"I'm fine."

"Yeah, right. You always make a habit of sleeping in snow-filled caves?"

"If you can read my mind then you know the answer already."

"I can hear your thoughts, but that doesn't mean they make sense. And I can't pull out everything that is in your mind."

She cocked her head. He'd never seen more intense blue eyes.

*If you can read my thoughts, then take off your shirt so that I can see if you're as well-built a human as you are a werewolf.*

He grinned broadly at her thoughts, which made her eyes open wide and her lips part in shock. Pulling his shirt over his head, he dropped it to the floor next to him and brushed his hair from his face. Her jaw dropped and she took a step backward as he moved closer.

"I think the last time we met, when I lifted your mate into the air and then dropped him to give him a taste of the humiliation he enjoys dishing out, I made it clear that I don't do parlor tricks." He watched her gaze drop from his face to his bare chest and then slowly rise again to stare at him. She snapped her mouth shut but then licked her lips. His cock shifted in his jeans. "Do you like what you see?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm mated."

"Consider yourself widowed." He didn't have all the facts as to why she slept in that cave, but any male who would allow his mate to do such a thing unaccompanied didn't deserve to live. "It's just a matter of timing at this point."

"Don't risk your life over a bitch you don't know."

"Sweet little bitch, there would be no risk involved."

She raised one eyebrow. It was so perfectly curved. This little *lunewulf* bitch appealed to him as much as she had the first time he'd seen her. What kind of fool would allow her to run like she had?

"You're mighty sure of yourself." She studied him for a minute, her thoughts jumping around so much in her head they were hard to follow. Maura was scared and turned on at the same time, making her scent even more enticing "You have that magic that Malta werewolves are despised for, don't you?"

"It's not magic. And yes, I do." He stepped closer, narrowing the distance between them, and reached for a strand of her silky blonde hair. "There's nothing to be scared of. I'm not going to do anything that you don't want."

He lowered his head, nipping at her lip until she opened to him, and then he devoured her with a savage kiss.

## Chapter Three

Something inside Maura twisted and swelled. His lips were hot, moist and pressed against hers until she couldn't breathe. When she sucked in a breath, he parted her lips, dipping into her mouth with his tongue. His hands ran down her arms, then pulled her against him. So much werewolf surrounded her that her instincts went haywire, making it damned hard to think. She felt her fingernails lengthen but couldn't suck in enough air to calm her insides without drinking in more of his scent.

He pulled all ability to think straight out of her mind. At the same time, so much energy and raw power filled her with life, like she'd never lived before. Like she'd never been kissed before.

"Wait." She turned her head, pulling her mouth from his.

Josie ran his tongue across her cheek to her ear, breathing heavily into her hair. He scraped his teeth over her earlobe. "Why?" he whispered.

She trembled and tried stabilizing herself by grabbing his arms. Hard muscles twitched against her fingers.

"Because this is wrong."

Josie straightened. His scent changed so quickly. He grew alert, his body even harder than it was a moment before, which Maura would have thought impossible if she hadn't been touching him.

"You want to see me, touch me and then tell me this is wrong?" He had such a deep baritone, as well as dark features that complemented his straight black hair.

"I'm a mated bitch." No matter that she'd been kicked out, the fact still existed. And it really sucked. She couldn't remember when a better-looking werewolf had held her like this.

"You were kicked out?" he hissed, his dark eyes narrowing on her as he searched her face.

He seemed to grow before her. Realizing her fingers still were wrapped around his biceps, with muscles twitching furiously under her grasp, she let go of him and took a step backward.

"How did you know?"

"I already told you how I know."

She shook her head. "If you can read minds, then you would also know why this is wrong."

"I can hear your thoughts. There's a difference." He moved closer, pinning her against his wall when she took another step backward. "Do you really wish to honor a mating when he's sent you packing?"

"No. I don't want to honor the mating," she told him, suddenly angry. "But that doesn't mean that it no longer exists. I *am* a mated bitch."

He smiled, a slow action that made her blood boil. His teeth were white as ivory against his dark skin. Flames from the fire made his hair shine in parts. His body was as solid as rock, and big—real fucking big. But if he knew her thoughts, he'd hear that she drooled over him in her mind. When his smile broadened, heat rushed over her cheeks and she looked down.

Big mistake. Black curly chest hair sprinkled over such well-defined muscle that she licked her lips before she caught the action.

"I'm flattered," he growled.

His words vibrated inside her straight to her pussy.

Maura shoved him away, suddenly needing space. Air—any air that didn't smell completely of him. Somehow she doubted she'd find that in his den. But at least maybe if she didn't have an eyeful of all that packed muscle she might stop drooling. Every inch of her tingled when he backed up willingly and allowed her to move away from the wall.

But then he grabbed her arm. "You aren't leaving," he warned.

"You would keep me prisoner?"

"Hardly. But I would feed you my kill."

She turned, which was a big mistake. He still held her arm, and his thumb moved over her flesh, bringing the hairs on her skin to full attention. Somehow she worked her gaze past his rippling chest muscles and stared into his very determined expression.

Maura didn't have to be a mind reader to know he wasn't asking her a question. "I'd be honored to eat your kill," she said quietly, knowing it would be rude to say otherwise. Not to mention she was hungry. Or at least she had been before her stomach had twisted into a ball of weird emotions.

"For now, my den is your den." He pulled her as he walked toward a doorway that she guessed might lead to his kitchen.

If it led to his bedroom, she was in deep trouble. "I can't stay here. This is Malta territory."

Josie turned and grabbed her. He lifted her off the floor with such little effort she was too stunned to fight back. Pete didn't have half this werewolf's strength.

"And he doesn't have half my honor either," Josie growled, pushing her back against the wall next to the doorway. He pressed his body against hers—a body like steel that pulsed with confidence.

"You know everything that's in my head." She sounded like an idiot. He'd already told her several times that he did. She didn't like it though. It was unnerving having him finish her thoughts for her.

"No. I hear your thoughts. That doesn't mean that I know everything you know." He leaned in closer. A strand of straight black hair fell over one eyebrow. "But there is one thing I know."

"What's that?" She was drowning in his black eyes. Lowering her gaze to the dark shadow that covered his jawline didn't calm her smoldering brain any. Now she had thoughts of how rough it might feel scraping across her skin.

"I know that you're safe here with me, and this is where you want to be."

Damn him for his cocky attitude. "I wasn't thinking that. Don't pretend you know me, wolf man."

Josie relaxed his body and slowly allowed some space between the two of them. When he took a step backward, her jaw dropped. Maura remained pinned to the wall. Her body didn't move and nothing held her there. She looked down, tried leaning forward and let out a yelp when she saw her feet dangling underneath her with nothing but air between them and the floor. She slapped her palms against the wall.

"What the fuck?"

Josie crossed his arms over his chest. Long, corded muscle stretched in his forearms and he stared at her, his expression turning sober.

"*Lunewulf* territory is on the next mountain," he began slowly in that deep baritone of his. "And the highway running between our packs is still a few miles from where our territory begins. Are you telling me that you didn't intentionally run toward our pack?"

"I-I..." she stammered, frantically looking at the floor and then struggling to look over her shoulder. "How am I hanging here?"

"Because I put you there. Answer the question."

Maura stared into his dark eyes. Josie was quite possibly the best-looking werewolf she'd ever laid eyes on. His smell bordered on dangerous, with just enough lust and determination mixed in to make his scent damned near intoxicating. He didn't blink and his gaze didn't falter. With this magic of his, he was invincible. The kind of werewolf who would make an incredibly dangerous enemy. That reality shouldn't be turning her on so much. Being pinned to the wall should have her pissed, not wet.

"I knew Heidi was here," she said quietly. She forced herself to relax, accepting that however he did it, she wasn't going to move until he decided to move her. At least he wasn't hurting her. "But I didn't enter your pack. I found a cave. I wasn't sure what I was going to do."

"You knew I was here."

"Yes. I remembered you from when I came here with Heidi before she mated with Nicolo." Obviously Pete remembered that day too. Some of their pack witnessed his humiliation on the day that Josie suspended him in the air and then let him drop to the

ground, announcing that he was being punished for abusing her. It had been the first time anyone had ever stood up for her, and it had been a stranger. Pete mentioned that he'd claim she ran off with her lover. He'd use the one day she'd felt a small amount of victory over him against her and claim there was something going on between her and Josie.

Hatred must have twisted her expression. She dropped her gaze when he suddenly looked at her differently.

"Your mate is a waste of werewolf flesh," Josie snarled.

Her eyes burned, but she wouldn't let him see her humiliation. "We all make mistakes," she said lightly, trying to shrug while stuck to his wall.

"This isn't a mistake." He moved closer, touching the tip of her chin.

His gaze smoldered, the heat burying deep inside her. All anger washed out of her. Her current situation demanded too much of her attention to think about Pete. She licked her suddenly dry lips. "What isn't?"

"Keeping you here."

"Are you going to keep me on this wall until I agree to stay?"

"Possibly." He made a slow trail from her chin to the tip of her collarbone.

"It would be hard to eat stuck here." She fought not to shiver against his touch. She was anything but cold.

"You're sexy as hell there though." He kept his finger pressed against the tip of her collarbone while making a show of devouring her with his gaze.

"I'd look just as good if you let me down."

"Oh?"

"Yes." She was entering dangerous territory here. His scent changed immediately.

He took a step backward, keeping his finger at the base of her neck. She moved from the wall and floated in the air just in front of him.

"Shit." She let out a very undignified squeal and grabbed at him, clawing at his bare chest.

"Trust me." His expression grew serious.

"I don't even know you."

"You can't smell good from bad?"

"Obviously not." Or she wouldn't have a mate who willingly dumped her on the side of the road.

"Making mistakes doesn't mean you can't see something good when you're staring at it."

She looked up into his gorgeous face. "Damned cocky wolf man."

He raised one eyebrow and her tummy did flip-flops. God. His scent kept getting muskier, creeping inside her, filling her until her pussy swelled and throbbed.



"You misunderstand," he said quietly, his baritone deepening and rushing over her like a warm breeze. "I know I'm not making a mistake keeping you here."

"You predict the future too?" She looked down at the floor and her feet dangling beneath her. It dawned on her that she'd relaxed though, her hand simply resting on his bare shoulder.

"Nope. Just sure of the present."

"Probably because your feet are on the floor."

She wasn't sure why she gripped his shoulder harder when he moved his finger. But he grunted, grabbing her attention.

"You need to trust me."

"I do," she said, although her voice wavered.

Josie chuckled. At the same time she drifted higher into the air until she looked down at him instead of eye to eye.

"Oh shit. God." She tried clawing at his shoulder, but could no longer reach it.

"All I ask is that you trust me." He looked up at her and his hair touched his shoulder. It was straight and smooth, so black and shiny. His watchful gaze left her face and he looked at her head-on, which had him now staring at her breasts.

Her nipples puckered. It was like his gaze sent prickles over her flesh, making her breasts swell and grow, eager for more attention.

"I trust you." She willed him to look back up at her.

He didn't. "No lies."

Maura let out a sigh, forcing herself to relax. It was the most bizarre experience floating in the air, unable to make herself go forward or backward, up or down. She hated losing control. But the only way to regain it would be making Josie believe she trusted him.

"I trust you," she said, emphasizing each word.

Slowly she floated to the floor. The hard floor pressed against her toes, and then her heels. She looked down, moving one leg and then the other, then turning. He'd released whatever invisible hold he had on her. If there was any way to learn his tricks, she would love to do it.

"I learned as a pup," he said quietly.

She crossed her arms over her chest, although she doubted any shield would work against him. "If I think something, you hear it?"

"Yup."

"What if you're in a group of werewolves?"

"It can get annoying."

"I bet." But also be one hell of a weapon. "Your pack leader must love you."

"I'm not sure about that. We've known each other most of our lives." Josie put his hand on her shoulder and guided her into a small kitchen. The faint smell of meat woke her stomach with a growl. "There's been a few times when he's hated my guts."

His fingers scorched her skin right through her shirt. Heat washed over her flesh even when he quit touching her. "That's how it is with best friends." She needed to stay focused on the conversation. If her thoughts wandered in the direction of that hot body of his, he'd hear every word. Giving him the upper hand like that didn't sit well with her.

"I don't have best friends."

"Why not?"

"It's safer that way."

"Sounds lonely."

Muscles rippled under his dark skin as he pulled a couple steaks out of the refrigerator and then tossed them onto the broiler. She watched him bend over. Buns of steel flexed against his jeans. He closed the broiler and then turned the knob on the oven.

"Lonely is a state of mind." He faced her, a strand of hair again covering one eyebrow. "And feeling sorry for yourself is a weakness. I'm not into being weak."

"I can see that." She itched to move that strand of hair off his forehead. But if she thought about touching him, he would know it, not to mention she didn't want to fill the small kitchen with the smell of her lust. "I'm not into being weak either. You've caught me in a predicament. But I've been in them before, and I can get myself out of this one."

He tilted his head slightly, studying her. He branded her with his gaze, leaving her skin feeling hot and prickly wherever he looked.

"Tell me what happened." He moved closer and then reached for her hair, which fell over her breast.

His knuckles brushed her nipple as he gathered her hair in his hand, and for a moment she couldn't think of a damned thing to say. Closing her eyes, she reminded herself that she was still mated, and doing anything with this male was not an option. Not to mention the all-important fact that he was a Malta werewolf and she was *lunewulf*. Their packs hardly got along.

"My mate is insane." She forced a light laugh, waving her hand in an effort to make light of it.

His grip tightened on her hair as he twisted it around his fingers. If she moved, she'd have to yank her hair free first.

"Go on," he instructed.

She didn't look up at his face. Although staring at his broad chest made it just as hard to think. Talking about Pete was the last thing she wanted to do, but it might keep

her from doing what she really wanted. And running her hands over all that steel muscle would take her places she probably shouldn't go.

Maura inhaled deeply, filling her lungs with his all-male scent. "I humiliated him by going to our pack leader and asking to be let out of the mating."

"Why did you do that?"

She bit her lip. Her insides were full of Josie's scent. He stood close enough to fill her vision with dark, rippling muscle. There was no seeing past him, not when she stood this close. And his fingers, softly caressing her hair, distracted her further. Her pussy throbbed. Her breasts swelled and her tummy filled with butterflies. None of the reasons for going to Bob's seemed important anymore, not with this sexy hunk of a werewolf standing inches in front of her.

"Because I was sick of it," she hissed and grabbed his arm, exerting an effort to make him release her hair.

Josie moved quickly. His fingers slid free from her hair but then he grabbed her wrist and yanked her forward. She fell against his chest, feeling like she just hit a brick wall. It knocked the wind out of her and made her heart flutter a mile a minute. He would be one hell of a fucking aggressive lover.

"When was the last time he fucked you?" he whispered above her head. He pressed one hand in the middle of her back, holding her against him. His heart beat solidly in his chest, and she felt his words as well as heard them rumble inside her. "How long has it been since you've slept with a werewolf at your side?"

His second question slit through her heart. It was that obvious how much neglect and abuse she endured. "It doesn't matter." She shook her head slowly and watched strands of her hair cling to the black, curly, coarse hair on his chest. "He doesn't love me and doesn't want me. That much is clear."

"How long since you've been fucked?"

She lifted her face and looked into his dark, penetrating eyes. "You can't gather that information by sniffing through my brain?"

He took a moment to answer and then growled before he spoke. She smelled his frustration. "Not when you aren't sure of the answer yourself. You haven't had sex in quite a long time, have you?"

What was the point in denying the truth? Slowly, she shook her head, then looked away from that determined stare of his and instead focused on the stove, which had begun warming the room and filling the air around them with the smell of cooking meat. Although sniffing it out over Josie's powerful aroma wasn't an easy task.

"Do you not like sex?"

His question surprised her. "Of course I do."

When she met his gaze she realized he'd already guessed that much. His gaze grew possessive, his scent aggressive.

"Then you begged for it."

"I don't beg for anything."

"Not even when you want it more than you want to breathe?"

"I shouldn't have to beg for sex." And if they kept up this discussion, she had a feeling he'd be willing to prove that to her. "Besides, what bitch wants to fuck a male who always smells like he's just been fucked by someone else?"

Josie growled with the ferocity a werewolf displayed right before he sent his fist through a wall. She moved without thinking, jumping out of his way. His outraged expression softened immediately. Nonetheless, instinct kicked in hard. Run—get away from this huge, powerful werewolf. She knew nothing about him. If he had a nasty temper, he was twice Pete's size, and with strange magic backing his strength, she'd have no way of defending herself.

Josie grabbed her as thoughts of bolting out of the kitchen hit her. With enough ease that it scared her, he lifted her off the floor—at least this time using his hands—and placed her on the counter next to the stove. Her ass hit the smooth wooden surface. He spread her legs with his body and leaned into her. The back of her head hit the cabinets behind her. She reached to shove him away, attack if necessary. The smell of her panic only elevated the intense need to react to his actions. No matter that he was at least ten times stronger than she was. Maura would fight for her last breath if necessary. No werewolf would ever hurt her again—no matter what it took.

"I will never hurt you," he whispered into her face, his eyes so close to hers she swore she saw into his soul.

And she hated that she trembled, that his words made her eyes sting, that the salty smell of her nervousness clogged the air between them.

"Okay," she whispered. And even then she choked on the one word. She squeezed her eyes shut, willing the pain away. Pete wouldn't ruin her—she wouldn't give him that power. Just because this werewolf showed a bit of aggression—hell, it was in their nature to be aggressive—she wouldn't flinch, wouldn't jump like a terrified bitch and run with her tail between her legs. And she hated herself when she realized she'd almost tried to do just that.

"He will die for what he's done to you," Josie growled, his lips brushing over hers as he spoke.

There was no such thing as a werewolf in shining armor, one who would sweep her off her feet and rescue her from all of her misery. No matter that Josie had already swept her off her feet several times since she entered his den. Promises were just words. And words didn't have the strength of actions. Even as his mouth pressed against hers and his tongue stroked her until she opened to him, she wouldn't let the heat that swelled inside her melt her heart.

He cupped her face with long, strong fingers, gently caressing her temples while angling her face to deepen the kiss. His body pressed into hers. Maura brushed her fingertips over his smooth flesh, feeling the length and curves of all that muscle bulging in his chest and shoulders. She ached to explore him, to feel every inch of his power. As

she ran her palms over his shoulders and then down his biceps, muscles quivered and then grew hard against her touch. She doubted there was much of anything soft about Josie.

As if he read her mind and ached to show her how hard every bit of him was, he moved his hand to her back and slid her closer to him. Hell. He probably enjoyed every bit of her tormented thoughts at the moment – thoughts of letting herself go and taking in every inch of this wild werewolf.

Her legs spread further and her crotch pressed against his. His hard cock burned like fire against her pussy. Even through denim, heat sunk deep inside her. She opened for him, drowning in him as she wrapped her arms around his neck and did her best to devour his mouth. Maura wasn't sure she'd ever had so much hard-packed muscle pressed against almost every inch of her.

When his mouth left hers, she was panting harder than if she'd just raced up the side of the mountain.

"I'm going to fuck you," he promised, his breath scorching her neck as he nibbled on her oversensitive flesh.

"Josie. Please." She had to find the rational side of her brain. It was in her head somewhere. "Just because Pete cheated on me doesn't make it okay for me to dishonor our mating as well."

Josie straightened, and she hated that she had dampened the mood, ending the best foreplay she would probably ever experience in her life. And it had just been a kiss. The dull throb in her swelling heart hurt almost as bad as the sudden growing knot in her gut. Damn, it was tempting to make a hypocrite out of herself and say what the hell.

"Trust me, Maura. There is no mating any longer. I told you to already consider yourself a widow."

She searched his face, and it hit her that maybe he had some kind of magic that could reach across the mountain all the way to the *lunewulf* pack and destroy Pete. She pushed the thought to the front of her mind, repeating it, and waited to see if Josie would comment.

His expression didn't change. Maura frowned. "I can't consider myself a widow until I know that I am one. And why would you kill for me? We're strangers."

"Because already I know your honor is as strong as you are beautiful."

"If you kill for me, then I would be your mate."

## Chapter Four

Josie didn't comment. Her mind was in too much turmoil to pursue the topic of mating and pack tradition. Instead he turned his attention to the meat. Opening the broiler, he stabbed one steak with his knife and lifted it from its juices.

"That isn't something I want you to worry about right now." She deserved some kind of answer from him. "Come eat my kill while it's still rare."

Her stomach growled in response. She'd run hard last night, rode hard on adrenaline while out in the wilderness and more than likely worried through most of the night. It didn't surprise him a bit that she was starving.

"Can I help?" she asked from behind him. *Anything to keep my hands and mind off your body*, she added in her thoughts.

"Sit and let me feed you." He grinned with his back to her, his pride having a field day over how much she enjoyed watching him move around half naked. It didn't take hearing her thoughts. He could smell her lust on her.

Many bitches reacted this way around him. He knew he was one hell of a catch, or so they thought. But in the end, he was best at one-night stands. Sooner or later any Malta bitch would bring up his promiscuous past, quickly grow jealous of other bitches sniffing him out and would turn into nags or attempt to fight every bitch in the pack who glanced in his direction. Neither appealed to him.

Maura didn't know about his past. Although if she spent more time with Heidi and Nicolo, he had no doubt Nicolo would warn against spending too much time with the male slut of their pack.

After putting both slabs of meat on a large serving plate, he grabbed a knife and then placed the plate on the table. Roped muscle bulged under his dark skin as he ran the knife through the thick steaks. Her mouth watered and she knew it wasn't just from the rich, tantalizing aroma of cooked meat. "There are many qualities that make werewolves strong," he began, gliding the blade down the center of the steak. Blood and juice poured from the thick slab of meat, pooling around it. He stabbed a sliced portion with the tip of the knife and lifted it to her moist lips. "But it is our traditions that keep us invincible, and they will always ensure that we are the strongest, most powerful species on earth."

She had the most captivating blue eyes. Her lips parted when he pressed the meat to them, and for a moment she stared at him as if she saw deep into his soul. He would swear she understood the meaning behind his words. Feeding a bitch his kill was a sign that he intended to make her his female.

According to tradition, it was the first stage in the dating process. Oftentimes done publicly, so both dens would be aware of the interest between a male and female, a werewolf would offer his kill to a bitch. If the dens approved, the next stage would be public runs together—although in the twenty-first century, more times than not, that consisted of simply going out to bars or nightclubs together. Malta werewolves and *lunewulfs* didn't socialize together. And Josie didn't have a den to show her off to in order to gain a blessing. Nonetheless, preparing and offering her fresh meat he had killed with his own claws meant he had an agenda. Maura knew that. Slowly she opened her mouth, and accepted the meat.

It had been in her mind earlier that actions meant more than words. Coming up with poetic words wasn't his style. His actions would show what he could not say to her before. He pulled the knife from the meat and watched her close her lips and chew.

The morning sun shone through his kitchen window, highlighting the different shades of blonde in her hair. It also brought to his attention an almost faded bruise that lined the side of her face. Josie cut more meat, offering her each bite, which she accepted. Silently he contemplated the best way to kill her mate.

No werewolf who treated a bitch like a punching bag had a right to live.

"Enough," she said after he fed her half of one of the slabs of meat. "I'm really full."

For the first time Maura smiled genuinely. It was hard to believe her eyes could sparkle the way that they did. They were a dark shade of blue, like a rare sapphire, solid with no other shades mixed in. Her skin was smooth and without any blemishes. And shy of a tiny scar that wrapped over the side of her jawbone, there wasn't an imperfection on her anywhere that he could see.

*He is sizing me up, drawing his conclusions of me now. She relaxed, leaning back in her chair. Her thoughts were easy to hear. And if I learn anything from this mess, it's that I absolutely suck at judging males. What if this one turns out to be as bad as Pete?*

Josie let her sit there and study him while he sliced more of the meat. He ate what was left in silence so he could hear her thoughts. Although before he finished off the meat, what appetite he thought he had quickly disappeared.

*What is Pete doing right now? I know he'll do just as he said. He is spreading lies, convincing my pack that I ran from him, left him for some fictitious lover. Why didn't I see sooner what a loser he was? This is all my fault. I have no pack, no den, nothing to call my own, and all because I fell for a pretty face with a solid reputation. And where does it leave me? Alone. Well, not alone. I'm in the den of a single Malta werewolf who is better-looking and more powerful than any lunewulf I've ever known. But what will he think when he learns how tarnished I am?*

He'd heard enough. Josie had learned over the years how not to explode over some of the thoughts he picked up from other werewolves. Nonetheless, it took a lot of effort to appear calm when he ached to set a few facts straight right now. "Go shower and I'll clean up here. The bathroom is down the hall. I should have a shirt that you can wear

after you're clean, and we'll have Heidi and Moira bring over some more clothes for you."

He stood, taking the plate to the counter.

"I can wear the clothes I was wearing before."

"Nope. You'll wear nothing that reminds you of the stench that sent you packing. Go. Do as I say now." He contained his anger. Releasing it in front of her would only make her skittish.

Maura must have sensed that he was serious. She left the kitchen and he heard the bathroom door close behind her. Turning on his faucet, he stared at the blood-covered plate while the water washed over it. Instinct screamed to seek out blood, tear through flesh and then wash it away just as the water in his sink cleaned off the plate.

Maura had been wronged. She deserved the fight. Her honor would be restored if he clawed out Pete Wagner's heart. But she was right. And her argument left a strange taste in his mouth. Fighting for her would make her his mate. No matter that she was *lunewulf*, that their packs bordered on extreme hostility if not all-out war every time they crossed paths, werewolf tradition ran stronger and deeper than any feud between packs. Even if their pack leaders despised the truth, if he killed for her, Maura would be his.

There wasn't much that scared Josie. But thinking about settling down with one bitch and keeping her by his side for life terrified the hell out of him. Josie might be many things, but he'd never been accused of running without honor. Not once had he fucked another male's bitch. He'd never stolen or killed without good cause. His pride and reputation made him the strong werewolf he was known and feared for being. Yet the thought of mating scared the piss out of him. What if he couldn't pull it off?

And accepting this simple truth made him feel he was less of a male than he liked to believe he was. Somehow he needed to figure out how to kill her mate, set Maura free and restore her honor without taking that freedom away from her the moment Pete Wagner's heart quit beating. Once he got that one down, then he would work on how he would handle another male looking at Maura. Just having her scent lingering in his kitchen appealed to him.

"Shit." He blew out an exasperated sigh. His thoughts bounced back and forth and it annoyed the shit out of him. "Distract yourself, man. Figure out the details later."

Josie had an extra-extra-large flannel shirt, one of his favorites. He carried it over his arm when he entered the steamy bathroom, after letting Maura soak in the shower for a while without disturbing her. He paused once he pushed open the bathroom door. The humidity wrapped around him, filled with her scent. But that didn't distract him as much as what he heard.

Maura hummed in the shower, every now and then putting words to the ancient song she sang. An old standard sung by mothers throughout the world to their pups. She mumbled the words, her voice melodic and so sweet-sounding. Then she hummed the chorus.



The hot water obviously did her some good. Her thoughts drifted without direction, jumping from thoughts of him, to her past, to briefly contemplating her future. But when she broke into song, keeping her voice quiet so that if the door had been shut it would have been hard to hear her over the water, her thoughts faded and a peacefulness settled over her.

"I've got a shirt." His words silenced her and he immediately regretted speaking.

She peeked around the shower curtain, holding it tightly so that all he saw was her soapy hair and streams of water running down her cheeks and clinging to her eyelashes. She blinked, then brought up her hand to keep soap from her eyes.

"Just a shirt?"

"I doubt you'd fit into my pants."

"I'm sure not." Her gaze traveled down him quickly. Then she disappeared behind the curtain.

Damn. It sucked big time that he hadn't bought a clear shower curtain instead of the opaque dark green one that now hid her body from him.

"The towel is clean. I'll throw your clothes in with my laundry." Or possibly burn them. He didn't want anything in his den that remotely smelled of the bastard *lunewulf* that she called mate.

She started humming again, but her tone and mood had changed. It didn't take climbing into her mind to learn why. Her thoughts jumped out at him without his bidding.

*I'll end up fucking him if he keeps me naked in his den. And God...what if I like it? Who the hell are you kidding, Maura? You'd fucking love it. All that muscle. He's so tall, so perfect in every way. I am in so much trouble. Fucking him would be such a mistake but damn it if I don't want him. Yes. I want him. I want him now.*

There was no way he could walk out of the bathroom. Leaning quietly against the door, he listened to her thoughts parade around inside her head. His cock stiffened and grew until it hurt like hell being confined in his jeans. Maybe he should just shed out of his clothes and join her in that shower—ease both of their pain.

*It would be such a mistake to fuck him though. What would it accomplish? Duh. That's a stupid question. It would satisfy a craving that has burned like a wildfire inside you for over six months now.*

She either hadn't had sex in six months or possibly had very unfulfilling sex since she'd been mated. As hot as she was, he would have to guess the latter. Tradition stated that when a male fucked a female, he mated with her. Josie considered himself a werewolf with honor. When it came to unmated females who just wanted casual sex, he'd never been one to argue though. The blessing of the gift in its fullest strength meant he had more responsibility in protecting the pack than others might. That had been a damned convenient excuse throughout his adult life as to why he didn't mate. Even for five years when Malta werewolves had no pack, the werewolves he ran with relied on him for protection. And he took that rank and responsibility very seriously.

There had only been time to fuck them and leave them smelling happy and full of his come.

And that's what it would accomplish now too. Both of them would be left happy and no longer distracted by each other physically so they could focus on other matters and ensure Maura remained safe.

*But would it accomplish anything else? Josie is a stranger. It would take a tall tale before I believed he didn't have every unmated bitch in this pack howling for him. He's any female's fantasy. And he'd much rather be with a bitch from his own pack, that is the same breed he is, than with a lunewulf bitch who would bring on so much trouble and grief.*

Josie's opinion of her didn't change after hearing that her self-esteem was mangled. She'd been through hell. None of it was her fault. He didn't doubt for a moment that with time she'd run strong, proud and with confidence. But today, the morning after she'd been tossed to the side of the road like an unwanted puppy, just a bit of reassurance would certainly help her spirits.

Josie stepped forward, the steam from her very hot shower already making his skin moist. Undoing his belt, he slid it from the loops, then slid his zipper down. His cock thrust forward, thrilled to be released from confinement. Blood pumped faster inside him, heightening his senses and making his dick even harder. For a moment he experienced lightheadedness, the throbbing in his groin almost draining the rest of him. But then his other senses kicked in. With his heart thumping so hard due to his erection, the change crept forward, aching to take over and pump even more life inside his already overheated body. His instincts grew increasingly acute. The need to fuck, put his mark on her, demand her submission and claim every inch of her burned like a motherfucker over every inch of him.

And it took one breath, then two, slow and deep, to keep his mind sane. Ripping his shower curtain from the rod and pouncing on her wet, sultry body would scare the living crap out of her.

Although it sounded damned appealing.

"Maura."

Her thoughts silenced.

He kicked off his shoes and stepped out of his pants. His skin tingled when tiny hairs stood at attention, sprouting through his flesh.

"What are you doing?" Maura stepped under the spray of water when he climbed into his bathtub. "Umm...Josie."

"When I'd barely reached adulthood," he began, adjusting the shower curtain so that it trapped the steam. Hot water rushed over her naked body and sprayed against him. "I learned that admitting to hearing others' thoughts was more honorable than pretending that I never heard a word."

Maura blinked quickly several times. She grabbed her long blonde hair and twisted water from it and then let her gaze travel down his body. Trying to keep his dick soft while streams of water rushed over her breasts and past her slender hips would be

impossible. He didn't try. It pulsed eagerly, and if she'd been able to hear his thoughts at the moment her cheeks would be redder than they were now.

Josie stepped closer and then took her arm when she tried twisting away from him. "Move too quickly and you'll slip and fall," he told her.

"You stood out there and listened to my thoughts," she accused.

"The only way I can't hear what you're thinking is if you quit having thoughts."

"I can't do that." She didn't pull away but looked up into his face.

"And I can't quit hearing them," he told her, then pulled her against him.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked, but then slid her small hands up his shoulders when he claimed her mouth.

Her *lunewulf* breeding explained her petite build, and her thoughts would explain passive behavior. But Maura leaned into him, stretching against his body while her hands brushed over his shoulders until she locked her fingers behind his neck. He guessed that she might hesitate, even go frigid when he touched her, but instead she deepened the kiss.

Tilting her head, she opened her mouth wider, then moved her tongue in a slow dance around his. *You came to me because of my thoughts. But I feel so insane right now that anything you heard in my head had to make me sound like a lunatic. Do crazy bitches turn you on, wolf man?*

He chuckled and she smiled, her lips stretching against his. "This is going to take some getting accustomed to," she whispered as water rushed over their faces.

He opened his eyes and stared down into her glowing blue eyes. "That sounds like you're considering spending time with me."

When she quit standing on tiptoe, the top of her head barely came to his shoulders. He looked at her forehead, glanced at her slender nose turned up slightly, and then lower, at her large breasts. He could smother his face in those mounds of flesh, or press his dick between them and fuck her there until he exploded.

"The only thing I'm considering right now is whether to fuck you or kick you out of my shower."

"Think you've got the strength to kick me out?"

"Are you a rapist?" she challenged him.

Josie took her hands off his shoulders and watched silver streak through her bright blue eyes when he lowered them to his cock. Guiding her, he wrapped her palms around him. She ran her fingers down the length of his shaft and then slowly began a stroking rhythm.

"Maura." He hissed her name and bit his lower lip. The taste of his blood added fury to the intense need that already boiled inside him. "I've never raped a bitch in my life, nor would I ever."

"I believe you." She almost panted. *You wouldn't have to*, she added in her thoughts.

"Not usually." He looked down at her through blurred vision. She blushed even though he made it as clear as he could that he would speak to her mind as well as her voice. "Stroke me, Maura. Just like you are now. That feels so damned good."

Water streamed over her long hair. Her lips parted and her teeth extended. "Why are we doing this?" she asked, her voice a bit garbled, which added to her incredible sex appeal.

"Because we both want it." He told her what she already knew. "You planned on fucking me when you agreed to stay here instead of leaving with your friend."

A protest was on her lips. She almost denied his words. *He is arrogant and cocky as hell.* "I feared it would come to this," she conceded. He'd give her credit for learning that around him only the truth would be tolerated.

"And are you still afraid?" Her emotions were easy to smell, and fear wasn't one of them.

"Terrified," she murmured. She looked up at him while moving her fingers up and down his cock with a bit more confidence. "But not of you."

"Not only beautiful, but intelligent too." He would have howled her praises even if her hands weren't on his cock.

No matter that she believed otherwise.

"Thank you." She moved so the shower didn't hit her back. "I don't suppose you know how to make water hot again." She grinned and released his cock but pushed into him. Her soft, smooth abdomen pressed against his shaft.

"You'd be surprised what I can do." He wrapped his arm around her, pinning her to him, and then reached down to adjust the taps so that hotter water sprayed over their bodies.

"Smartass," she growled, flipping her soaked hair over her shoulder.

"I'll give you smartass." He pushed her around so that the water sprayed in her face, and then gripped her hips. "What a perfect fucking ass."

Her palms slapped against the shower wall. Lust hung heavily in the steam surrounding them. She arched her body, looking over her shoulder at him as he admired how perfectly shaped her ass was. He grabbed her arms, keeping her against the shower wall, and positioned himself behind her.

*Don't panic. Don't give Pete that power. No werewolf will ever do to you what Pete did. Relax and enjoy this.*

Shit. He was ready to force her into position, thrust his cock between her legs and then slide deep into her hot pussy. Instinct bulldozed over all rational thought while his muscles bulged and blood raced in his veins. Not every werewolf would possess the strength to calm his insides and force himself to be gentler.

He had to squat a fair bit in order to match her size so he could get between her legs. Just thinking of the many ways he'd love to fuck her made his dick feel like it would explode. For now though, while water streamed over her, he opted to adjust

their positioning just a bit so they could enjoy their first time as much as possible in these close quarters. Granted, the space was tight, but he'd fuck her in a box if it meant being able to watch water rush over her sensual curves.

"I don't want you thinking of any werewolf but me," he whispered into her ear, and then used his gift to lift her into the air.

"Josie," she cried out, trying to claw the shower wall while her voice squeaked with surprise.

"Spread your legs, little bitch," he instructed, holding her in the air with his mind. She floated high enough that her ass pressed against his cock. Nothing existed in his world at the moment other than her. "And look over your shoulder. I want to see your face when I enter you."

*I can't believe this is happening. The pressure...oh hell...I need this so bad.*

She fought to do as he said and thought only about him. Maura wouldn't let ghosts from her past destroy her future. Although her wounds were fresh, she was strong, determined. And she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

"That's it," he whispered, his muscles twitching with his efforts not to get too rough. "Spread your legs. All that matters right now is that you're going to know pleasure unlike anything you've ever known."

"Awful damned sure of yourself, wolf man." She breathed in deeply while stretching her body against the shower wall. "I may not have your magic, but I can smell your lust. Maybe you've always fantasized about sinking that big dick of yours into a *lunewolf* bitch."

Josie laughed even as blood drained to his cock. "Over the past few months that thought might have entered my mind a time or two."

A slow, satisfied smile swept over her face. Her canines were extended and pressed against her gums, making her mouth look even fuller. Josie gazed at her, but his vision blurred when he pressed his cock against her ass. Adjusting himself and holding his shaft with his hand, he eased between her soft flesh.

"You're fucking wet."

"We're in the shower." She twitched her ass teasingly but then sucked in a sharp breath when he found the source of her heat.

"Do you want it fast and hard? Or maybe you'd prefer it slow and torturous?"

"You're teasing yourself as much as you are me." She tried sounding nonchalant.

But her scent grew ripier, a sweet, musky aroma that drove him as mad as stroking the outside of her hot, wet pussy. *If he waits much longer I'm going to die, absolutely fucking die.*

He thought of making her beg, but forming words, let alone thinking about what to say to her got harder to do as the fire coming from inside her scalded his cock. He'd take her hard, ride her quick and give them both what they needed. Then after coming once, he'd be better at plotting out a slow seduction. Maura would be worth fucking

several times in one day. He hadn't even entered her yet and already he would rate her as one of the better fucks he'd ever had.

"I don't tease," he managed to tell her, and then thrust his cock deep inside her pussy.

"Oh shit!" Maura scraped the walls with her nails, howling as she tried twisting around to grab him.

"It's okay, little bitch." Josie wrapped his arms around her waist and held her firmly while gliding into her incredibly tight pussy.

There was no way she was a virgin. He would have known from her thoughts if she had been. But fuck! Hot, sleek muscles wrapped around him, soaking and sucking his dick deep into overwhelming warmth. Her pussy walls contracted, then twitched and stretched, sending incredible sensations pumping deep inside him. Pushing his way in deeper, he pressed his hands over her huge breasts, squeezing her plump flesh. Her nipples puckered against his palms as she arched against him.

"It didn't look this big," she whispered, dropping her chin toward her chest but then lifting her head quickly so that she almost smacked him. "Josie. Oh. Josie."

She panted, every muscle in her body stiffening and then relaxing when he eased even farther into her smoldering heat.

*He's going to kill me. I'm going to die. No way are we compatible. Shit. Shit. Shit.*

Josie straightened his body, massaging her round ass and watching while his shaft filled her. They were compatible, possibly more so than with anyone else either of them had been with. In spite of her fears, he smelled her trust. And knowing that she trusted him when they hardly knew each other made him want her even more.

*Just breathe. God. He feels so fucking good. Better than anything I've ever had before, and he hasn't even really started fucking me yet. Listening to her laugh in her mind was the most melodic sound he'd ever heard. With all this magic that he has, no one would ever hurt me again. Just tell me this isn't a dream. Please don't let me wake up and learn that this perfect werewolf is just my overwrought imagination and that in actuality I'm still in a cold, damp cave.*

It hit him that she trusted him for the same reasons that most feared and hated him. That moved something inside him and created an odd sensation he couldn't identify. A warmth rushed over him. And it wasn't from fucking her. Maura thought the world of him because of who he was. Because of his gift. She liked him for him. She didn't want to manipulate him. She didn't think of him as a freak. Not once did it enter her mind to howl to her friends that they better treat her right or she would make Josie do something to them. She didn't want to use him.

Damn. Maura wasn't the only one with an abusive past.

Spreading her ass so he could see better, he pulled out slowly, groaning at the sight of milky cream covering his shaft. Then he plunged back into her heat. Right now wasn't the time to dwell on why she moved his insides the way no other bitch had. All he would think about now was how damned good it felt to be inside her.

"Shit!" she cried, leaning her head back and taking all of him.

The water pounded his flesh, keeping both of them soaked as he braced himself and picked up rhythm.

"I've never felt a more compatible bitch." He loved how her arms stretched, her palms flat against the wall and her fingers curling and then straightening. She was petite, but every inch of her was nicely toned, without an ounce of fat on her anywhere. Blonde hair draped over her back in thick, wet strands, fanning out just above her ass. "In spite of our different breeds, I swear you were made for my cock."

"It does feel good. Faster. Please. I need this so bad." She coughed, or possibly cried out, and her thoughts turned into a warm flood of mixed emotions that grew incoherent. "I can't believe I just begged," she whispered.

Her soft voice tickled his ears, but he heard her and suppressed a smile, instead clamping his teeth together and giving her what she wanted. Picking up momentum and pounding that hot fucking pussy of hers had his cock swelling. All oxygen and blood rushed out of his brain. Every drop of water that splattered on his body ignited new sensations as nerve endings grew more sensitive.

And as his heart pounded, he knew he'd swell quick and furiously in moments. But slowing down wouldn't do any good either. Josie pushed as hard as he dared, knowing the instant he took her over the edge. The sound of her nails scraping down the side of his shower wall sent shivers rushing over his flesh. Her moan turned into a growl and she bent her knees, then kicked her legs as she again tried pulling away from him.

"Let it go, sweet bitch. Don't fight it." Something told him no werewolf had ever truly made her come before.

She thrashed against him. With her feet floating off the floor, she didn't slip. Josie held on to her, keeping himself deep inside her as he experienced the contraction of thousands of tiny muscles. Her orgasm ripped through her entire body. He felt every inch of her, not just her pussy, spasm and contract while intense heat spilled over his cock.

The way her pussy vibrated around his cock pushed him as far as he could take it. As her body went limp, Josie pulled out, holding on to her with one arm and grabbing his cock with his other hand. He spilled his come over her back and ass. Then still holding her, ensuring she kept her balance while she worked to slow her breathing, he watched the shower wash his cream off her body and down the drain.

It took a few minutes before his cock softened, although it did so a lot faster than if he'd been lodged deep inside her. The urge to take her again was almost too strong to fight. His temples pounded as blood pumped vigorously inside him. He focused on the beat of it, keeping his thoughts inward, and didn't dare move until his dick returned to almost its normal size. Had he come inside her, they would have been locked together longer than he had hot water left. A sudden cold shower wasn't his idea of the best way to come down after damned good sex.

He allowed her to float to the floor then let her go and quickly adjusted the water so that what was left of the hot water streamed over them. "Rinse off and I'll grab another towel," he instructed her, then stepped around the shower curtain.

Just a moment or two without her in his arms and he'd get the fire to subside inside his body. The cold air hitting his wet body helped clear his head, and he left puddles on his floor as he left the bathroom and grabbed a clean towel from the hall closet.

Josie headed to his bedroom instead of returning to the bathroom and dried, then dressed in there. Maura took her time in the bathroom, more than likely needing a moment to breathe air that wasn't thick with his scent. She'd moved him in there. More so than surrendering her hot pussy to him and proving to be one hell of a damned good fuck. Maura possessed a determined spirit, a pure and honest nature that grabbed hold of something inside him that hadn't been touched before.

And her thoughts, so free of manipulation or an agenda. Unlike any bitch he'd known before, Maura had to be one of a kind. Just like him. Like he'd always imagined his soul mate would be, the bitch who would run by his side, kill for him and be honored when he lay his kill at her paws.

He intentionally set his standards incredibly high when it came to defining what the perfect female for him would be like so that he would never find her. But just now, he feared he might have. Now to figure out what the hell to do about that.



## Chapter Five

"Are you sure you're okay?" Heidi's concerned tone over the phone warmed Maura's heart. Not that she was cold at all with the fire roaring in Josie's fireplace. "Nicolo says we can come right over with more clothes."

"That would be great. Thank you." She snuggled into the corner of the couch and glanced around the living room.

The cabin was solid, warm and cozy. It was very masculine, from the rough log walls to the wooden floors with several bear rugs thrown in front of the fireplace. Everything smelled of Josie. His mark was on everything, including her. She looked toward the kitchen, where he had headed out the back door moments before telling her he would be back inside in a few minutes. She wondered how far away he had to be before he couldn't hear her thoughts anymore. It had to be quite some distance since it had been her thoughts in her sleep that sent him up the mountain looking for her earlier today.

"Heidi, what do you know about Josie?"

"Not a lot. He and Nicolo have known each other since they were pups. I doubt Nicolo would have approved of you staying there if he didn't trust the werewolf. Do you like him?"

"I shouldn't be able to pass judgment on him after just a few hours." She lowered her voice even though she knew he hadn't come back inside yet.

"You've already fucked him, haven't you?" Heidi sounded so excited that her voice squeaked.

Nicolo's growl in the background only made Heidi laugh. Maura straightened, moving to the edge of the couch. She realized she had pressed the phone hard to the side of her face and forced her hand to relax. It would be so awesome to have such a relaxed relationship with a male. She couldn't crawl through the phone or do anything to smell Heidi's emotions, but she sensed her friend's happiness. Maura wanted that too.

"And how long were we together before you fucked me, wolf man?" Heidi teased, but then returned to her conversation with Maura. "Was he any good?" Nicolo roared in the background and Heidi burst out into a fit of giggles. "I guess we can do our girl talk when we get there. We'll be over as soon as I calm down this werewolf of mine." Heidi was still laughing when she hung up the phone.

Maura stared at the cordless receiver in her hand and ran her finger over the small holes in it. There wasn't anyone else to call. She thought about calling her pack leader.

But what would be the point? Did she really want to go back? Bob may or may not believe her story. But if he did, what would he do with her?

A mated bitch thrown out of her pack by her mate would be stuck in limbo between mated and single status. If Pete agreed to take her back, Bob would hand her right over to him. Then what? Pete would haul her right back out and throw her away again? This time making sure he did it right?

There was no way Maura would live through that humiliation twice.

Where exactly did that leave her?

The back door opened and a gust of wind blew down the hallway, tickling her bare feet before Josie shut the back door.

He stomped his boots on the kitchen floor. Freshly cut wood, a mixture of dirt and pine and Josie's own strong male scent wrapped around her. Maura tugged at the long shirt she wore, attempting to cover her legs, and waited. He appeared in the doorway in the next minute.

"Nicolo and his mate will be here soon." He didn't propose it as a question. Either he'd spoken with Nicolo or those powers he had aided him in gaining the knowledge that they'd soon have company.

"Heidi said they were on their way." She didn't worry about trying to learn how he knew.

Every inch of her still pulsed with feverish energy from being fucked so well in the shower. Josie walked across the living room wearing comfortable-looking jeans and a tucked in white shirt. Thick wool socks covered his large feet. He bent over and opened the wood box, then dumped the freshly cut logs into it. She almost drooled over the view of his perfect, hard ass.

"What will you tell her when she gets here?" When he turned around, the satisfied expression on his face let her know that he had focused on her thoughts and approved of her adoring his body.

His caramel-shaded skin contrasted nicely with his white shirt. Black, straight hair bordered his face and fell in thick, damp strands almost to his shoulders. Dark eyes glowed as he watched her, adding to the mystery surrounding the man who stood before her.

"The truth, of course. She'll believe me."

"That's not what I meant. I'm not concerned about your past. It's your future that matters now."

"Oh." Already her pussy throbbed, aching to feel him inside her again. She doubted that was the future he referred to and when his expression turned brooding, she knew she was right. "I honestly don't know what the best thing is to do." Maybe she could talk this out with him. Although he was a stranger, they had a moment of intimacy and discussing options might help her see what her best move might be.

"Your options," he began, obviously following her line of thought as if it had been part of the conversation. "You can stay here, with me, or you can leave."

She wondered how long it would take to get used to her mind being open discussion material. There were no secrets with this werewolf – other than what was on his mind.

"Okay. If I leave..." The only way to know his mind was to get him talking. "More than likely I would have to run until I found a pack willing to take me in. I'd like to think most packs would welcome me."

"Any pack leader would research your past the moment you announced your presence in their territory. Your pack leader would be contacted." He turned his back to her again and squatted in front of the fireplace, reaching for the long metal poker. He adjusted the burning logs then carefully placed another log onto the fire. Sparks danced in the air around him. They didn't sway him, which somehow added to the invincible persona he presented.

"If I stay here, my pack leader will also be contacted." She doubted Josie would keep her here without letting anyone know.

He glanced over his shoulder, then put down the poker and turned slightly, still on his haunches when a slow, breath-stealing smile darkened his features. "That thought certainly has its appeal," he said with a low growl.

Maura shifted on the couch, refusing to allow the sensation that she was being hunted grab hold of her. Nonetheless, her breath caught in her throat when Josie rose slowly, his scent turning richer as he moved in on her. The couch shifted noticeably underneath her with his weight. He sat, stretching his legs, then rested his long, dark arm along the back. He stared at her from the opposite end and she nibbled her lower lip, knowing she couldn't hide what he did to her insides. And she couldn't quit thinking about how bizarre it would be knowing the thoughts of any male or female that you spent time with. "Your thoughts are so muddled that it's clear you aren't sure what you want." He spoke with no inflection, making it harder to tell if he insulted her or not. "I doubt I'm far off target when I suggest you haven't had much opportunity to choose your own path. How did you come to be with the *lunewulf* pack you're with now – or were with until yesterday?"

Even though he spoke softly, not condemning, the truth of his words bit deep. Her gut twisted painfully. She wasn't in denial. But hearing that she was without a pack made it sink in even farther.

"This isn't the first time I've run alone." Confessing her past ate at her pride. But he might as well know now she wasn't a bitch from a strong line or a powerful den who would offer her up as some worthy catch. "Heidi and I met up in Canada and joined Bob, who is our pack leader now. There were a handful of us back then, and we grew as we came down through the States. I guess you could say our pack originated with the rogue *lunewulfs*, those wanting something other than what their local pack would give them."

She smiled as she remembered her wilder days, back when it didn't matter that she had no den or a name to fall back on. The lot of them was wild, eager and willing to go wherever fresh meat ran. They chased after an adventure and gave little thought to the future other than making sure there were meat to eat and at times a warm body to snuggle with and get laid.

Josie's slow smile probably matched the one on her face. "Our pasts are similar," he mused. "When I arrived in the States, it was pretty much jumping from one pack to the next. Except in my case, more times than not, I stayed until they learned about the Malta werewolf history, then I was sent packing."

"You could fight them," she protested, shaking her head. Their histories weren't the same.

"Sure." He raised one shoulder lazily, then let it fall. "But there was no point. Why give Malta werewolves a worse reputation than they already had? When I caught up with Nicolo and Dimitri, we learned about Dante's efforts to claim territory for Malta werewolves here in the mountains. They brought their den here and I followed them. It will take time before Malta werewolves are once again known as a powerful and invincible pack. But we're making our mark here. And we aren't going anywhere."

"I think you're closer to having that reputation than you think." Most of her pack spoke of Malta werewolves as a breed to leave alone. And it wasn't because they were ill-mannered.

Josie's dark eyes glowed like black gems, while his gaze burrowed deep into her soul. Even relaxed on the couch without an aggressive air about him, he looked deadly and so very capable of springing into action, protecting and fighting for what he viewed as his. Her tummy flip-flopped and her own scent changed as she wondered if he might ever view her as part of what he claimed.

"Come here," he growled, his voice a husky, rough whisper. He barely lifted his hand from the back of the couch and beckoned to her.

She couldn't hide her scent any more than she could keep her thoughts from him. Somehow knowing he had such complete power, able to know what was in her mind the second she did, gave her a warped feeling of security. There would never be secrets with this werewolf, but at the same time he could never claim he didn't know if she wanted something as well.

The oversized shirt hung low and rode up her ass, leaving her backside exposed and vulnerable as she crawled across the couch and then placed her hands on his shoulders. Josie continued reclining, his body relaxed and his arms spread, one on the arm of the couch and one on the back of it while watching her with a predator's gaze.

His scent called to her, building the need that already simmered inside her. She'd gone too long without good sex and had a feeling she could take all he could give her and still beg for more.

"Think so?" he whispered, then moved so quickly she barely saw his hand leave the arm of the couch before he grabbed a handful of her hair at the back of her head. It

stung when he held on to her tightly, keeping her face inches from his while watching her expression carefully. "If you plan on using me for sex until you've had your fill then it sounds like you've decided to stay for a while."

"Hearing my thoughts doesn't mean you've heard any decisions I've made, wolf man," she whispered, bracing herself over him while pressing her palms into his shoulders. His body was hot, and corded muscle twitched against her palms. "You must know any werewolf will imagine the best of scenarios in their mind. That doesn't mean that is how life plays out."

"Very true. But there is nothing wrong with fighting to have the best of what there is out there."

"I thought I did that once." Pete had appeared to be the best catch in the pack when she mated with him.

Josie let go of her hair and looked away from her. "I would never hit a bitch for any reason," he growled.

"I never implied that you would," she hissed, ready to take him on and show him that she wouldn't let Pete's abuse ruin her ability to be with another werewolf.

"You think fighting for the best that there is will get you what you've already had."

"No. I meant that once I thought Pete was the best. I made a mistake." Her knees barely pressed against his body. She leaned over him, her hands resting on his shoulders while she stretched over him. Even though he relaxed underneath her, giving her the aggressor's position, she had no doubt that he could take her down in a moment's notice.

"The only mistake you made was not knowing in your heart what you wanted for a mate."

"What I want hasn't changed. The sad part is, on the surface, he gave me everything I wanted—a den that was well respected in the pack."

"That has its appeal. It offers security. My den was killed in Malta."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I'm not sure where my mother is right now, and I never knew for sure who my sire was." She wasn't sure why she confessed the truth of her past—it certainly didn't make her measure up as a reputable bitch admitting more or less that her mother was a whore.

His gaze remained hooded. He turned his head slowly and appeared to focus on her hanging shirt. Underneath, with the material so loose, her breasts felt full and exposed even though he couldn't see any part of her from her position. But her backside was completely exposed and that built a heat inside her, making her pussy pulse with need.

"My sire died before we were burned out. My younger brother and I fought during the fires. He didn't make it. My mother didn't make it either." There wasn't any remorse in his voice. And she smelled no emotions on him when he shared the sad ending of his den.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said, even though she doubted he looked for sympathy. His expression never changed. Josie was damned hard to sniff out—a characteristic that kept her on the defensive.

He moved his hand from the back of the couch and ran it over her bare bottom. His touch singed her skin and she held her breath, fighting the urge not to arch into him or move her body so his fingers would reach the spot that craved his touch the most. The smell of her lust soaked the air around them.

"Sometimes the only way to have an honorable den is to build one on your own," he whispered, barely moving his mouth.

"That would be rather hard for me to do on my own." Very near impossible, actually. Females didn't establish a den on their own, unless they were widowed.

He had to be in her head at that moment. The second she thought about only a widowed bitch having the rank to build her own den, his gaze lifted to hers. Fire burned in his black orbs. Just imagining him taking on Pete, ripping the asshole to shreds, sent a shudder through her body. Would Josie really fight for her? Or more likely, would he secretly attack Pete, destroying him to give her freedom, but then not let anyone know he'd killed Pete so that he could keep from having to mate with her?

Maura shrieked when Josie flew off the couch—she swore he literally flew. His entire body shot forward, taking her with him. Hard muscle hit her like steel as she stumbled backward with his impact.

"When I kill a werewolf, I take credit for doing so," he hissed, his teeth turning pointy and pushing against his lips as he spoke.

Even though she was no match for him, her instincts kicked in when he sent them both flying off the couch. His arms were around her and he stepped forward until he pinned her to the wall. She didn't think about his powers or his strength in comparison to hers—she just reacted to the attack.

Fire burned in her veins. Her jaw stretched and her teeth extended. So did her nails. She clawed his shoulders and instantly inhaled the metallic smell of blood. The ripe, rich aroma called forth her more natural, pure state. She fought him, letting her instincts rule her actions.

"Only an idiot would kill a werewolf then announce it, knowing his reward would be a bitch he doesn't even know." Her words came out garbled as her teeth poked at her lips. The taste of her own blood fed her more carnal side. Even though he had his arms wrapped around her, she fought him, fisting her hands and hitting his shoulders. "Not to mention a *lunewolf* bitch, one your kind despises."

"Does it look like I despise you?" he whispered, then lowered his head and nipped at her lip. He growled when he ran his tongue over the spot where she'd bit herself.

Her insides sparked with desire. She grabbed his shoulders and held on to him while she pressed into him to deepen the kiss. He released his grip on her, then scorched her skin when he ran his hands down her arms and then under her shirt. Gripping her ass, he pulled her closer, lifting her so that his hard cock pressed into her.

"Our bodies don't despise each other." Her head fell back, bumping the wall. She didn't feel the thud. So much powerful muscle pressed against her and his hard cock throbbed between them. Her insides swarmed with need and with every breath she inhaled his masculine scent. Trying to make him see what she was sure he already knew seemed like too much effort. But since she couldn't smell any emotions on him other than lust, she had to try. "But just because you can crawl around inside my mind doesn't mean I have a clue what is going on inside your mind."

"Ask me anything and I will tell you." He nipped at her lip again but then straightened. "Accept your widow status, and when you're ready to hear why I would do it, then I will tell you."

With that he backed away from her. She noticed the tear in his shirt from where she'd scratched him with her nails extended. He either didn't notice or didn't care. His gaze traveled down her before he turned his back to her.

That was when she heard footsteps outside. His scent and mood changed and he stiffened. For the first time since she'd arrived here she smelled something other than lust on him—a strong, deadly protector's instinct. It was ripe, musky and so intoxicating it almost made her lightheaded. With his back to her he raised one arm, then pointed.

"It's Nicolo and Heidi. She has clothes for you and you two may go into my bedroom to visit while I speak with Nicolo out here. Go into my room now. You aren't dressed appropriately. Heidi will come join you."

Maura headed into his bedroom. Josie would fuck her after having her in his den for less than a day but then turn around and insist she be respected and out of sight because she wasn't presentable. She put her hand on the doorknob to shut the door when Josie opened the front door. Cold air immediately wrapped around her legs and she pushed the door until it was almost closed, using it to block the air from outside. She listened to the greetings, knowing Nicolo was a werewolf Josie had known for years. Yet in spite of his friendship, he would honor Maura enough to make sure she didn't appear like a bitch willing to spread her legs in exchange for a bit of protection.

"Did he hurt you?" Heidi whispered as she appeared in the small hallway, then stepped into Josie's bedroom when Maura opened the door farther for her. "Oh man. Talk about the smell of sex being intoxicating. Give me all the details."

She handed Maura a bundle of clothes and then stood watching her while Maura shut the door. The males must have stepped outside, making it impossible for them to be overheard, or for her to overhear anything they would say.

"He's really hard for me to figure out, and no, he hasn't hurt me."

"I saw the rips in his shirt. It looks like you clawed him. But then from how it smells in here, maybe those claw marks are proof that he's a damned good fuck?" She waggled her eyebrows, her face glowing from the cold. The fresh smell of happiness and amusement were a wonderful, refreshing scent.

"He's got that magic they talk about Malta werewolves having." She wasn't sure why she kept her voice quiet, but somehow she wasn't convinced they wouldn't be overheard if Josie decided he wanted to listen in. "And he took me by surprise right before you got here. I reacted instinctively and attacked. He's a damned hard werewolf to figure out."

Heidi laughed and then plopped down on the edge of Josie's unmade bed. She smelled indifferent to the ripe aroma of Josie clinging to it as she let her gaze travel over Maura. She smiled when Maura pulled Josie's shirt over her head and then began trying on Heidi's clothes.

"Nicolo said that same thing about Josie when we were talking about the two of you earlier. I really don't know him that well and so asked Nicolo to tell me about him. I figured that way I could at least find out for you if he were a good male or not."

"What did Nicolo say about him? I mean, other than he's impossible to figure out?" Maura realized Josie didn't have a mirror in his bedroom and peeked out the bedroom door, sniffing the air to determine if the males were in the cabin or not.

When she knew they were alone in the den, she headed to the bathroom with Heidi in tow.

"Nicolo grew up with Josie. He says Josie is an honorable werewolf, hardworking, but has never shown any interest in settling down with a bitch. Apparently he's fucked a lot of the bitches in the pack." She wrinkled her nose and tilted her head while studying the jeans and sweater Maura had on. "Those look good on you. Keep them. It might be a while before we can get into town to do any shopping."

"Somehow I doubt my ATM card will work even if we did make it into town." It shouldn't matter to her that Heidi just told her Josie slept around. He was gorgeous and single. What bitch wouldn't spread her legs for him? Nonetheless, she'd be damned if he'd go to another bitch while she was around. And she wouldn't dwell on why she was so adamant about him being loyal to her when they had no established relationship. "I appreciate your bringing the clothes. I'll figure out something so that I can get some more on my own. And I'll pay you back for these."

Heidi waved her hand, dismissing the idea. "Keep them. And keep the other clothes that I brought for you too." She leaned against the bathroom door and chewed her lower lip. Her scent revealed her worry. "Do you want to tell me what happened with you and Pete?"

She doubted this pack was any different from any other pack. Sooner or later gossip would fly. She might as well let the truth out now, before these Malta werewolves came up with their own good stories to explain her presence in Josie's den.

The history that led up to yesterday's events was irrelevant at this point. She shared with Heidi how she ended up dumped on the side of the highway while her friend looked at her, mortified. The spicy smell of her outrage tickled Maura's nose. It mixed in with Heidi's pity, which turned her stomach. She gestured for Heidi to open the



bathroom door, and the two of them stepped into the hallway, then moved to the living room when it was clear they were still alone.

"You could do a lot worse than staying here with Josie. I honestly don't know the werewolf that well, but it would be so wonderful to have you here and part of my pack. Malta werewolves aren't that bad. It's been three months and they've accepted me, although I really don't have a lot of friends."

"You look really happy."

"Oh. I am. Moira comes around sometimes. And Rosa, her cousin through mating — you'll love her. She has the gift too, so she might be able to help you understand it a bit. I'll call her and we'll all get together here really soon."

Heidi seemed convinced Maura would stay. "You can't assume I'm just going to move in here and make this my den."

"Where else would you go?"

The door opened behind Heidi and both bitches turned around when Josie filled the doorway with his massive frame. "She isn't going anywhere," he growled with enough conviction that Maura's heart leapt to her throat. "If there's anything you want or anywhere you wish to go, I'll see to it."

"It's not like I'm a single bitch," she retorted, even as excitement pumped energetically in her veins at the realization that Josie would stand up and growl on her behalf.

"Since you're so preoccupied with your status, tomorrow you can return to your pack. But I promise you now, when you enter the *lunewulf* pack, it will be for a brief visit so that you'll believe and accept your status as widow."

"If you know that Pete is already dead, I would like to know how you know." She fought the urge to look away when his penetrating gaze turned deadly.

"I'll tell you all the details when I return."

"Return. Where are you going?" she asked.

"To visit the *lunewulf* pack leader. You'll stay with Heidi and Nicolo while I'm gone."

## Chapter Six

Josie took off over the mountain from his den. Too many risks were involved if he stopped anywhere else prior to heading over to *lunewulf* territory. There weren't many Malta werewolves who could hear thoughts at the level that he could. Most of them had to be within range. And they were the lucky ones. But if he stumbled upon another member of his pack who had the gift, and they got a whiff of what he was about to do, the shit would be ugly.

The best thing to do was run hard and fast—and straight into *lunewulf* territory.

It was damned annoying hearing thoughts from every werewolf on the mountain. Usually he could tune them out. And he would bet Dante did the same. For the most part, the others in his pack didn't possess the gift at the level he and Dante did. Possibly Moira, but since she was a female, he didn't press into her mind as much. She was mated, and that just wasn't right. Rosa, Dante's cousin who lately was sniffing around Dimitri a lot, also smelled of the gift. Josie wasn't around her enough to determine what level. And he really didn't care.

As long as Dante wasn't trying to seek out his thoughts at the moment, Josie had nothing to worry about. He reached the edge of the mountain and then began stripping. The midday sun already battled with oncoming clouds, which made the breeze even colder. He didn't dwell on the weather. Even as it attacked his bare skin, he let the change take over. The boiling energy in his veins prevented him from shivering uncontrollably and he quickly tied his clothes together and wrapped them around his neck.

There would be no laws binding him, no one capable of stopping him. That knowledge brought the change on with even more fury. Unconquerable. Invincible. Nothing and no one possessed the ability to stop Josie from doing what needed to be done.

Muscles and bones altered as he changed from a human male into his werewolf form. His surroundings grew more vivid, while every smell got stronger. Josie fell to all fours, the pain that racked his body fading quickly as the change finished its process. He focused on the snow-covered mountainous terrain in front of him while his mind quit analyzing everything and switched over to instinct.

In his animal form, suddenly his plan was simple. What needed to be done seemed like pup's play. Taking off down the mountain toward the narrow highway that ran between Malta territory and *lunewulf* territory, Josie's long black coat protected him from the elements. Not that he gave the weather much thought. He dwelled on Maura, on the wrongs done to her. And what he needed to do to set her world right.

Maura wondered if he would kill Pete, offer her freedom and a widow's status but then not wish to mate with her. When she put it into words, it sounded like a rather coldhearted action. It wasn't that he didn't want Maura.

God. He didn't want to mate with anyone. Josie wasn't good mating material. At least he knew that about himself, unlike many werewolves who claimed a bitch and then made her miserable for the rest of her life.

Maura did more than enter his den and offer damned good sex. Other bitches had done the same in the past. Although usually his gift made them nervous or a bit too curious. They would play mind games, intentionally think something just to see what his reaction would be. Or they would panic inside, becoming almost frigid. Then their scent would turn grossly unappealing. Others would fight him just to see what parlor tricks he might perform.

Maura hadn't done any of those things. She accepted him for who he was without challenging or making demands. What appealed even more was that she actually liked him for who he was. She didn't want him to change, and she didn't want to analyze him. That damn near made her just about the most perfect little bitch he had ever sniffed out. Maura was perfection in every sense of the word. Not that any of that mattered. And that wasn't why he was racing into *lunewulf* territory right now.

Then why was he?

Josie slowed when he reached the highway, knowing few humans traveled on this road, yet using caution nonetheless.

The animals native to the mountains surrounded him. He didn't need to sniff them out when their primitive minds were so easily heard. Even though deer and smaller rodents didn't think per se, instinct led them. He could hear the basic patterns that controlled their minds, but it didn't bother him. Coming out into the wilderness offered a peace he never experienced when he was with the pack. For once his mind was clear. The only thoughts he heard were his own. Although today his thoughts were as jumbled as if he heard an entire pack thinking at once.

Josie moved fallen trees out of his way with his mind, watching them float through the air as he rearranged them to create bridges over dangerous streams that ran down the mountain. He chose a straight path between his pack and the *lunewulf* pack, which he was able to do only because he used the gift to clear the way and make it easier to run along.

Most of this took little thought, which allowed him time as he worked his way across the mountain to think about what had happened to him since he woke up this morning. Those soft, alluring thoughts that called to him, woke him from a dreamless night's sleep, seemed to be changing his life. Never had he gone to such effort to ensure a bitch's happiness. And after knowing her less than a day.

Granted, he did meet her a few months ago. And she had entered his thoughts a time or two since that meeting. Maura was just about the hottest little bitch he'd ever laid his eyes on. Her scent added to her appeal, so fresh and full of life. But when her

male appeared on that day months back—the day Nicolo took Heidi as his mate—Maura had shriveled inside, her mind giving up, as if she accepted being sentenced to a miserable existence.

Something happened to her over the past few months. Because when he found her this morning, the determination soaring inside her made her beauty and her scent absolutely irresistible. He would fight for this bitch. And he planned on killing for her.

There was one problem with his simple, foolproof plan. Fighting for a bitch, killing her mate, meant taking her as his mate. Josie always honored pack tradition. He killed in the name of werewolf law and tradition in the past. And would again in a second.

But take a mate?

That would mean being with only one bitch for the rest of his life. It would mean opening up to her, letting her inside his mind. Already Maura questioned the fact that he knew her inside and out after their brief time together, yet she knew nothing about him. He accepted his gift—if anything, he took it for granted. Knowing everything that everyone else thought was one thing. Letting someone else climb into his thoughts was something else altogether.

Sharing his thoughts with a bitch would mean he would have to know his own mind. Why was it so much easier to understand others than it was to understand himself? The last thing he would ever admit to a soul was that he didn't get why he felt the way he did. He never shared his feelings with any bitch. He didn't because he didn't have feelings. Well, he did—everyone did. But Josie didn't like focusing on how he felt. More times than not, it led to pain and heartache. A gash in his arm or leg mended easier than a broken heart. He had to protect that part of his body with everything he had. That meant not opening up to a soul.

There was no way he could give Maura what she wanted.

But he could give her what she deserved.

Josie slowed down when the *lunewolf* pack came into sight. They were growing in number it appeared, a newer development visible from where he stood, climbing up the side of the mountain opposite him. Roads had been cleared and foundations poured. Werewolf Affairs provided funding for pack improvements, something the Malta pack had seen little of. This country still wasn't sure they wanted Malta werewolves on their land. It was a heated topic of discussion, and one Josie didn't want to dwell on at the moment. His reasons for being here were a bit more personal.

He wouldn't dwell on how personal.

Hell. He might as well not think about a damned thing. Act on instinct and then head to his den and call it a day. Josie growled at his unwillingness to focus on the reasoning behind his actions.

Which of course was the main reason he had almost threatened Nicolo when he made him promise to hold on to Maura until he returned. Nicolo was probably the only werewolf who wouldn't judge or question Josie's actions. His lifetime friend's knowing gaze disturbed Josie though.

Josie had taken off quickly, not allowing any of them to question his motives, because that would only mean he would have to explain what he wasn't ready to accept himself. He might care a little bit too much for the *lunewulf* bitch who woke him this morning with her thoughts.

Damn it. Maybe he should just return to his pack and leave well enough alone. Josie paced the length of the cliff where he stood, his long black coat damp from running through deep drifts of snow. There was no turning back. Such a serious wrong would not go unpunished. He would sit and wait, listen to the thoughts of this pack, get the feel of them and then make his move when the time was right.

That was how it would be.

Josie watched the sunset and felt the cold night air chill his bones. Dimitri would know by now that Josie had left the pack. Which of course would mean he would know about Maura too. Josie left Maura with Nicolo because she was safe there, but he was also Dimitri's littermate. Dimitri saw Nicolo usually about once a week, and Nicolo wouldn't keep secrets from Dimitri if he showed up. Josie was too far away to know what was happening at his pack right now. He prepared himself for the possibility of his pack showing up before he reached the *lunewulf* pack. So far though, he sensed no one.

*Lunewulfs* were a small breed, known for their blond hair as humans and white coats as werewolves. Their most advertised trait, though, was speed. Josie considered himself in excellent health, at the prime of his life and the victor of every challenge he'd entered. His track record was impeccable because he possessed enough sense to know when not to enter a fight.

His hackles rose as he made his way slowly down the cliff and into the *lunewulf* pack. Gangbangs kicked ass when all parties were willing. The last thing he wanted happening tonight would be half the *lunewulf* pack chasing his ass down. Not his idea of a party.

Years of training made it easier to hang out in a pack—or in this case, on the edge of a pack—keep his emotions in check so he wouldn't be sniffed out as easily and listen to the thoughts surrounding him. In his earlier days, it took a lot of work to narrow down on the mind, or minds, he wanted to hear. But after thirty-some years of focusing on perfecting his gift, he managed to hear what he wanted a bit faster these days.

Josie allowed the change to surge to life inside him. His dark skin and coal-black hair would be a telltale giveaway. Anyone in this pack would recognize his breeding in a second. The trick was not to be spotted, reach Pete's den and do what he had to do, then leave just as quietly. As long as his scent didn't get picked up, he would pull this off. It wasn't the first time Josie had entered enemy territory to pay someone an unexpected visit. He wasn't half as worried about getting in and out of *lunewulf* territory as he was about dealing with the headache Dimitri would give him when he returned to his den.

The small bar on the end of the street was doing a lousy night's business. Granted, the night was early and most packs got out closer to midnight. There only needed to be one good car, and he quickly picked out the one that would serve him best.

A small four-wheeler with dark-tinted windows sat parked alongside the *lunewulf* establishment. Josie ran his hand over the cold metal, determining that it had sat there for at least long enough for the engine to cool, and focused on the building in front of him. There were four males inside the club, two of them wondering if they'd get any tail that evening, while the other two seemed preoccupied with personal den problems. None of their thoughts interested him.

He walked the length of the car, not surprised to find it locked. Waiting in the shadows, he watched while a few more *lunewulfs* showed up, Josie passed the time reaching out to listen to the rambling thoughts of the members of this pack. It wouldn't hurt to listen for anything that might help Malta werewolves while killing time until his male arrived.

Fortunately less than an hour later a *lunewulf* exited the bar, rattling his keys in his hands as he reached the car. Josie's wait was over. In spite of the cold, sweat trickled down the back of his neck as anticipation rushed around inside him.

"Cold night," Josie said quietly, watching as the male's eyes grew wide with surprise.

Suspicion and anger took over quickly. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Such hostility." Josie pointed at the blond male, doing so only for the sake of drama, although if anyone he knew saw him right now he probably wouldn't have blinked an eye before using his gift. He hated more than anything being called a drama king when he used the gift.

The poor *lunewulf* bastard flew over Josie's head and into the woods behind the bar. Josie took off in a quick sprint, catching up with the *lunewulf* that he'd sent flying. Finding the male unconscious, he relieved him of his keys and patted him on the chest.

"You shouldn't drink and drive anyway," he told the male.

Leaving him in the woods to sleep it off, Josie ran back to the car and unlocked it. The tinted windows made it harder to see him as he left the parking lot and drove through the streets of the *lunewulf* community. He turned off the radio and heater, not needing any sound to distract him as he focused on the thoughts of this pack while driving slowly over the cleared roads.

It took some effort listening to all of the voices in his head while driving, although he was a hell of a lot better at multitasking than he'd been years ago. If he tried driving or running in his fur while concentrating on so many different thoughts when he was younger, he would have wiped out for sure.

Pete Wagner had a hell of a lot of hostility in him, and his thoughts ran in circles. Josie learned over the years that werewolves with guilty consciences often repeated the same thoughts over and over in their minds, as if replaying scenarios until they found a way to accept one that would allow them to stomach some foul act they committed.

Pete dwelled on Maura, on how he ditched her on the side of the road and what he would say to the pack leader once he found the balls to announce that she was gone.

Interesting information—her pack didn't know she was missing yet. Josie weighed his options as he closed in on Pete. He wasn't sure why this piece of news surprised him. But it didn't settle well that her fucking pack didn't even know Maura was gone. When he found the den, he parked in front of the nice home and stared at the dwelling that Maura had lived in since she mated with Pete.

It was a nice place, even a bit on the fancy side. The small, simple cabin he had built with his own sweat and blood—and a lot of help from the gift—didn't hold a flame to this place. Maura was accustomed to a much better life than he ever dreamed of, or wanted. Maybe she wouldn't be happy living with a rogue werewolf who preferred a simpler, much more isolated existence.

Josie ran his fingers through his thick hair and growled at where his thoughts headed. It didn't matter what appealed to her. He was here to help her gain her freedom and the right to call her own shots—that was it.

He stared at the den while an image of Maura appeared in his mind. For a moment he let go of the mutt's thoughts and let his attention sway to how soft her body felt and what a wonderfully sweet lover she was. The way she howled when she came and groaned when she licked and nipped at his body simply added to her many appealing attributes. Picturing her dressed, her long, silky blonde hair damp and falling down her backside while she moved around his den wearing only his shirt, got his dick harder than stone. Her bright blue eyes took in everything, and her sweet, sultry scent seemed to make his small den come to life. God. He loved how she fucking smelled.

And the way she thought, not trying to hide her mind from him, showed him how much she trusted him. She adored his body and how he acted. Maura thought the world of him, and he didn't want to fuck that up. Any bitch he spent time with in the past went out of her way to control her mind around him. Maura didn't even seem to care about manipulating him or her own thoughts in any way. As long as the damned pedestal she'd placed him on didn't crumble from underneath him, he'd go to any extreme to keep her happy and content.

What was she doing right now? Nicolo would make sure she never left his den. Would Maura hang out with his mate, catching up on old times and sitting quietly chatting about the things females talked about? For about the twentieth time since he left his pack, Josie wondered if Dimitri had stopped by Nicolo's den yet. He would know soon enough when he returned to his pack.

Forcing the image of her from his thoughts, Josie returned his attention to the den in front of him. He would also worry about her reaction to his being here once he returned to his den. Even if she didn't forgive him for what he was about to do, at least she would have her freedom. Maura deserved that. She deserved a hell of a lot more than that—he just wasn't sure he was the werewolf who could make her happy. Sure, he could satisfy her, and he knew he appealed to her. But letting a bitch tie him down, put a collar around him, put a foul taste in his mouth. The worst part of it all was that

she would want in his mind, arguing that he was in hers. Which was fair. There was just one problem. No one got in his mind. Josie even stayed out of his own head as often as possible. Other werewolves' thoughts were a hell of a lot more appealing than his own.

Maura deserved better. Better than the runt inside this fancy den, and better than Josie could give her.

He scowled and squinted through the tinted window of the borrowed car he sat in, studying the well-groomed suburban den. Pete Wagner would die. Josie would give Maura this. That much he could do.

Josie focused once again on the thoughts of the *lunewulf* inside. Pete planned on going out. The front door opened and the male stepped into the cold night air. Instantly he froze when he saw the car sitting out on the street. Pete knew the male who owned the vehicle Josie had borrowed. It didn't surprise Josie that Pete didn't get along with the *lunewulf* who currently lay unconscious out in the woods. More than likely, the scum didn't get along with most of his pack. It was a damned shame that a waste of werewolf flesh like this asshole managed to get his paws on something as beautiful and precious as Maura.

Instead of coming to the car, Pete turned to his den, hurrying back inside. He intended to call the bitch who he planned on visiting and stall for time until the car moved away from his den. Pete actually had the nerve to question if the male who drove this vehicle might be considering paying Maura a visit. Pete ached for evidence that his mate was unfaithful—anything to take to his pack leader and justify why she had disappeared.

He might as well have it out with Pete inside his den as in the front yard. Cutting the engine, he hopped out of the car and pocketed the keys. Even the outside of this den smelled of aggravation and foul play. It was a wonder no one else noticed. Or maybe these *lunewulfs* went out of their way to ignore anything that might lead to a confrontation. Where was the fight, the honor, in this pack?

Josie opened the front door to the den before he reached it and didn't slow his gait until he entered.

"Oh shit!" Pete about jumped out of his skin as he stared wide-eyed at the door that opened by itself, and then Josie, who stood a good six inches taller than him and probably weighed at least a hundred pounds more. "Who...who are you?"

"It would be grossly clichéd to say your worst nightmare." Josie didn't see any need for introductions. He watched Pete drop the phone and heard a female screech on the other end, although Pete didn't seem to notice her wailing. Josie picked the cell phone up off the floor and spoke into it. "This won't take long," he said while Pete stumbled backward.

"What won't take long?" Pete sniffed the air frantically, his entire face scrunching up while he tried to decipher Josie's scent. "You're a Malta werewolf," the genius added.



"Damned smart *lunewulf*." Josie hung up the phone, putting an end to the cries from the female on the other end of the line. If the bitch had half a brain, she would call for reinforcements to help Pete out. Josie didn't plan on being here that long though. "I warned you a few months ago that I didn't approve of males using females as punching bags."

Pete backed up farther and stopped only when he pressed against the living room wall. The muttering, whimpering sound coming out of him was almost as annoying as his rampant thoughts. As terrified as he was right now, he would never put two and two together. Josie didn't feel like waiting around until Pete figured it out.

As much as he wished he could torture Pete a little, make him beg and experience the humiliation that he put Maura through during her mating with him, there just wasn't time. Josie learned a long time ago that trying to rehabilitate a bully often proved to be a waste of breath anyway. They would return to their old ways the second he walked out of their lives.

So, as much as there was no true honor in the fight, Josie lunged forward, lifted Pete by his scrawny neck and twisted it. Pete let out a gurgling sound and clawed at Josie's hands. His grip relaxed after a short time and he quit kicking and thrashing. Josie dropped the lifeless *lunewulf* on the floor and glared at him.

"That is for Maura. I promised her widow status," he told Pete.

Pete didn't answer though. He lay crumpled on his living room floor — dead.

Josie returned the car to the small bar just outside the *lunewulf* town and dropped the keys on the unconscious male in the woods. If the male remembered flying backward in the air before falling to the ground, knocked out cold, he wouldn't mention it to anyone. The humiliation would keep the male quiet.

By the time Josie reached Malta territory again, he was running at maximum speed, his claws tearing into frozen snow and dirt while racing up the mountain. Adrenaline pumped inside him with a vengeance. As much as he loved getting outside the pack so he could clear his head of everyone's thoughts, there were times when it sucked that all he could hear were his own thoughts. At the moment, they plagued him like a nasty disease.

He should be grateful there weren't any confrontations with more of the *lunewulf* pack. Everything went as he planned. Pete was dead. Maura no longer had to fear him, or live a life with a choke collar on her. He fulfilled his promise to her. There was no challenge. Josie hadn't announced a damn thing. He had simply taken the *lunewulf*'s life.

Maura's words about him killing Pete without challenging him chewed annoyingly at his conscience though. Josie prided himself on being a werewolf with honor. He did what he did for Maura's happiness. Now she had her widow status. That wasn't a bad life for a female. She could go where she wanted, do what she wanted.

The thought of her running anywhere without him appealed about as much as her words suggesting his actions had no honor.

By the time he reached the top of his mountain, he was fucking sick of hearing his own thoughts. No matter how he looked at it, his mood grew more sour. Any other time he would haul ass, take a good, hard run and clear all demons from his mind. Or better yet, find a willing bitch and ride her hard and fast until they were both satisfied and exhausted. Diving deep into Maura's tight pussy sounded like a damned good idea. None of the Malta bitches in his pack sounded any good to him at the moment. There wasn't one of them that even came close to smelling as sweet as Maura.

But celebrating Pete's death with her might bring them closer together. Her deep blue eyes, her open mind and unhindered thoughts and her soft body pressed against his distracted him too much to seek out someone else. But if he fucked her again, then what?

The best thing to do would be to let her know her mate was dead. He would inform her that her pack didn't know she was missing. Maura could return to her den, have her widow status and live out her life with her own breed, never to be beaten again. And never see him again.

Yeah, he would tell her that. Soon. Josie reached his own den and let the change move inside him. His human body shook miserably from the cold as he struggled with the door to his den and then closed himself into darkness. Slowly he untied his clothes from his neck, feeling empty inside.

All he heard in his mind were the soft, drifting thoughts that he'd heard early this morning when he first woke up. It was as if she slept nearby, so close that her scent wrapped around him, calling him to her. Her dreams were peaceful, disjointed and medicinal to his distraught brain.

Josie walked barefoot to his fireplace. He would get a fire going, warm the place up, then crash and deal with everything tomorrow. As he squatted next to his timber box, grabbed the poker and stirred embers that hadn't quite gone out, it struck him as odd that his fire managed to burn all day long, unattended. Just as it seemed peculiar that Maura's thoughts drifted in his mind and her alluring aroma wrapped around his naked body – as if she were right here with him.

He dropped a few logs into the fire, got it roaring, which cast hard shadows across his dark living room, and quickly dried the sweat on his naked flesh. Then standing, he stood still and focused on her nonsensical dream thoughts. His gift was strong, powerful, but it wasn't that damned good.

Josie walked through the living room, down his short hall and into his bedroom. He stared at the small figure buried under his blankets in his bed.

Fucking Nicolo—he would beat the crap out of the werewolf. Why the hell did he allow Maura to return to Josie's den, where she now slept unprotected? If another werewolf had entered this cabin before he returned...

Not that any werewolf would dare violate his space, and Nicolo knew that.

"Well, hell." He scowled at his bed, then breathed in deeply and filled his lungs with everything that was Maura.

The fire would warm the cabin quickly, but crawling under those blankets next to her soft body sounded even better. Her long blonde hair drifted over her bare shoulder, and her soft breathing held a simple rhythm, unlike her rambling dream thoughts.

Josie dropped his pile of clothes on the floor and pulled back the blankets, feeling the warmth wrap around his chilled body before he even crawled into his bed.

Maura shifted, rolling over when he stretched out next to her. She murmured something unintelligible and then pressed her hot flesh against his chilled skin. Her thoughts shifted, growing more coherent for a moment.

*He's been out all night again. Don't wake up. Don't check to see if another bitch's scent lingers on his dick.*

Josie wanted to shake her, force her to wake up and see that it was him next to her and not Pete. But then there would be questions, discovery and acceptance of the truth. He relaxed slowly next to her, listening quietly until her thoughts returned to their disjointed state and her breathing deepened and slowed. If he didn't get any sleep tonight, at least he could enjoy how her breasts felt pressed against his chest and how her warm legs tangled around his. Her hair was like silk, and her breath tickled the flesh below his collarbone. Even if it were just for one night and the truth forced them to part ways tomorrow, he would lay here and enjoy this.

## Chapter Seven

It took Maura a second to respond to the odd smell that she inhaled. Coming to slowly, the events of last night returned to her. Sleeping with Heidi and Nicolo in the next room made her uncomfortable. There was no leaving their den without both of them knowing instantly. And after almost an hour of arguing, they both escorted her back over here. Josie's bed had looked so comfortable, and it called out to her to come snuggle. It surprised her she managed to fall asleep and not wake up when he returned to his den.

One of his arms was underneath her, providing a cushion for her neck. She turned, resting her cheek on his shoulder, and breathed in the smell of his run the night before. A mixture of dirt and pine, sweat and something else that she feared might be blood lingered on his body. And what a fucking body!

Her eyes adjusted to the dark room and she pulled the thick blankets that covered both of them down just a bit so she could admire his broad chest. Unlike Pete, Josie rippled with well-developed muscle absolutely everywhere. His body was harder than stone, every inch of him. Including his cock, which created a tent in the middle of the bed. Her mouth watered while her gut fluttered from need and a craving to climb on and ride him.

His body was warm and every inch of her front side burned where they pressed against each other. She dared to move her hand over his chest. Black, coarse curls tickled her palm and his scent grew riper, muskier. She quickly glanced up at his face. Josie was quite possibly the deadliest-looking werewolf she'd ever lay eyes on, but at the moment his expression was so relaxed. Long, thick lashes made it hard to see his eyes. Tiny black stubble covered his jawbone. She spotted a couple white hairs under his bottom lip and itched to run her fingers over them, feel how rough they might be. Imagining his mouth between her legs, that stubble brushing over her sensitive flesh, made moisture seep from her insides and soak her inner thighs.

*Are you in my mind, wolf man? Do you want me to mount you and drain that throbbing cock of yours?*

A muscle twitched in his arm. For a moment she thought he would grab her and yank her on top of him. But he didn't. His breathing remained slow. But there wasn't any hiding the lust she smelled growing between them. And it wasn't coming completely from her.

*Fine. Play the dominating, always in control werewolf. But know now, I don't beg. If I see something I like, I take it.*

Again muscles twitched, this time in his chest. Maura grinned and slid her hand under the covers. Josie was as naked as she was. And his cock was harder than rock,

long and thick and smooth like velvet against her hand. She wrapped her fingers around his thickness and began stroking, watching his face for the slightest indication that he was awake.

A tiny muscle twitched at the corner of his mouth. She grabbed his cock, using force, tugging while keeping her attention on his face. Josie sucked in a quick, hard breath. Maura grinned triumphantly. He wouldn't ignore her.

"So you want attention, do you?" he growled, barely moving his mouth.

*Oh. Hell yes!* She didn't mean to answer him with her mind as much as she just sang her own praises for getting him to acknowledge her.

Josie's arm came around her like a brick wall. She slipped down him, stopping when he gripped under her arm. She straddled him but then looked up when he stopped her. His expression remained relaxed, almost lazy, like one waking from a satisfying slumber. But his dark eyes, hooded by thick black lashes, pierced deep into her soul, building the pressure that already grew and tortured her insides.

"Did I say I wanted attention?" Again his mouth barely moved. His hoarse grumbling sent shivers over her flesh.

"Let go of me and we'll find out what you want," she whispered, feeling her insides twist with anticipation the longer he held her arm, preventing her from getting closer to his cock. "And maybe I'll find something that I want while I'm at it."

He didn't say anything. Damn him for being so hard to read. She wasn't wrong about his scent though. There was definite interest.

Maura grinned, determined to melt his rough, dominating exterior if it was the last thing she did. Far in the back of her mind, she wondered if his run last night had anything to do with his quiet, determined look. If Pete did still live, then her actions now made her no better than him. She pushed that thought out of her head quickly. The itch deep inside her pussy was impossible to ignore. Her fingers stroked his hard-as-rock cock. Once she had her fill of him, rode him until both of them were drained and satisfied, then she'd sniff out the truth about what he did last night.

"Not up for the ride, wolf man?" she teased, squeezing his shaft and then running her fingers up and down its length.

Silver sparked in his black orbs. "Climb on. But the ride ends when I say it ends."

He released her arm and she rubbed her breasts over his rough, dark skin, teasing her nipples into hard pebbles. Electric currents pierced her insides, racing from her nipples straight to her clit. The pressure inside her built even more. God. What a perfect male to devour and gain her satisfaction from.

Her senses heightened as blood raced in her veins. The urge to change, to attack and demand that he fill and pound her until the pressure subsided burned her alive inside. She growled and crawled over him, her hair falling over her face as she gazed into his virile stare.

Josie stretched his arms, then placed his hands behind his head, looking cockier than he had moments before. Even without touching her, making a show of giving her free rein, she still felt he completely controlled the situation. She would run the show though. And she would take him on if he tried to stop her. Maybe he was a hell of a lot stronger, but his lusty scent let her know her seductive manipulation wasn't that out of practice.

Maura shoved the thick quilts off his body. The chilly air in his room simply added to her arousal. She slid to the side of him and took in the view of his incredible body. His cock looked swollen and dangerous as it stretched into the air. Her mouth watered as she ran her finger over his swollen mushroom-shaped head. It was dark, a deep purple, while his shaft was thick and almost black with blood-filled veins twisting around it.

"I've never seen a more perfectly shaped cock," she whispered, moving her face closer and breathing in his thick, musky scent. It intoxicated her, made her feel wild.

Fighting the change so that her teeth wouldn't extend and hurt him, she moistened him with her tongue. His entire body jerked, giving her a sense of power that she quickly took to her advantage as she straddled his legs. Though she wasn't strong enough to pin him in place, the sensation of being in charge as she held his cock in her hand and stared into his glassy gaze filled her with more confidence than she ever experienced in the past during sex.

Before with Pete, the act of fucking simply meant enduring him touching her, penetrating her, until he came. Then she could go to sleep. But now, here, with Josie stretched out before her, every inch of her was on the verge of exploding when she wrapped her lips around him and sucked him as deeply into her mouth as she could.

Josie growled at the same time that his cock twitched inside her mouth. Up until this moment, Maura would call a bitch a liar to her face if she said she enjoyed the act of giving head. But watching his muscles flex across his chest and abdomen, like waves creating a tide on an otherwise calm sea, the power, the control and lust that grew inside her matched the pressure she swore would break her in two.

She hummed with delight, situating herself so she straddled his thick, powerful thighs. His leg hair tickled exposed, tender flesh. Maura rubbed her body over him, feeling like a bitch in heat while she sucked and licked his cock. His salty taste filled her mouth, and he swelled and twitched until her lips felt numb.

Looking up at him, Maura breathed in his rich scent. His expression was so intense, his mouth forming a thin line of concentration while his eyes were pressed closed. He was so beautiful, so perfect, his dark features and coal-black hair lying straight around his face and against the white pillowcase underneath him. His chest rose and fell with deep breaths while muscles constricted and contracted in his arms when he fisted and then relaxed his hands. Such a powerful and dangerous-looking werewolf, and she had him at her mercy. There wasn't a doubt in her mind that all he focused on that very moment was her mouth and what she was doing to him.

Knowing she had that kind of power made her so damned wet she could hardly stand it. It was a high and a pleasure that surpassed any incredible feeling she'd ever experienced before in her life. Her insides twitched, aching for him. And it was a curious thing that as much as she loved knowing what she did to him, every inch of her craved mounting his dick. She wasn't immune to the lustful control that smelled so thick and rich around them.

If she didn't slide him inside her, she would die. Rising over him, her lips trembled and her body shook as she straightened and braced her arms on either side of him. Josie opened his eyes, staring at her with more appreciation than any other male had ever bestowed on her. Something shifted inside her while staring into his black as night orbs. With such thick lashes surrounding them, and his dark skin, he looked so different than any male from her past. But that wasn't why he distracted her. That wasn't what made her insides tighten and then flip-flop. It was how he looked at her, the way he burrowed deeper into her mind than she dared go herself. Josie focused on her as if she were better than any other bitch. She almost came just drowning in his attention.

The smallest of smiles played at his lips, her only indication that he probably followed her thoughts word for word. Blushing, Maura looked down quickly, giving the muscles in his chest her undivided attention.

"Fuck me, little bitch," he ordered, his voice breathy and hoarse.

"Exactly what I had in mind." She was grateful for her long hair falling over her face. Although she reminded herself that her thoughts were as clear to him as her words, her thick strands still offered her just a bit of privacy as she fought to recover from her embarrassment.

Her heart pounded so hard she could hardly catch her breath. Yet she moved over him, feeling the heavy pulse throb in her pussy when she pressed onto his swollen cock. Distracted by the sensations washing over her, she wasn't ready when he grabbed her arms and then shoved himself deep into her heat.

"Oh shit!" she screamed, bucking on top of him but unable to move out of his grasp as he quickly took control. "Josie! Oh God!"

He impaled her, his jaw set with determination and his expression glowing with a fiery lust that did her in. The pressure inside her exploded, her orgasm hitting so hard and with so much fury that she swore the room turned sideways.

"There is no shame in loving sex," he whispered when she collapsed on top of him.

Maura grunted, certain she sounded incredibly crude and vulgar. Josie laughed, his body vibrating underneath her as his arms came around her. He held her close to him. He didn't use his strength, but held her affectionately, like a protector caring for his own. It turned the act into something more intimate and less primal. Slowly, he continued gliding in and out of her, soaking both of them with her come.

"I still can't believe how tight you are." He ran his hands down her back and then tangled his fingers in her hair.

Maura wouldn't think about how he made her feel. It was hard to believe Josie could be this tender. For some reason when he was tough, impossible to read and giving no indication of any thoughts going through his mind, it was easier to view their act as damned good fucking. But now, as he caressed her back, stroked her pussy walls and created so much heat inside her that she was damned close to boiling alive, what they shared moved to a more personal level.

*If I think that you care, I just know you'll stop doing this.* It was stupid talking to him in her mind, especially about the exact topic she didn't want him sensing in her thoughts. Josie was too closed off from the world, even from his pack according to Nicolo and Heidi, to appreciate her thinking that their fucking might have shifted to lovemaking.

Not that she was sure any male had ever truly made love to her before. Pete sure as hell hadn't. If what Josie did to her right now came even close, she could see how love might be truly beautiful between some males and bitches.

Maybe he had the power to turn his magic, or whatever it was, on and off at will. Either way, Josie didn't stop moving with slow, deliberate strokes in and out of her. Pressure built along with the heat. Maura tried shifting, moving so she could manipulate the way he stroked her insides. But he tightened his hold on her, breathing heavily into her neck and holding her just firmly enough to show her he didn't want her to move. His mouth brushed over her flesh and he took small nips, driving her insane as his teeth scraped the most sensitive part of her neck, right at the nape.

Josie stiffened underneath her. His legs straightened and muscles all over him bulged until she swore he was probably twice the size he was when they first started fucking. Her pussy throbbed. So many tiny muscles inside her twitched and swelled. Once again the pressure exploded and she cried out, stiffening on top of him.

The simple fact that he was so much stronger than she was enabled him to stay inside her when she convulsed and tried flying off him as she came so hard she was sure she would pass out.

"Josie! That is so...perfect." Again she burned with heat, her cheeks and neck on fire with her bold confession. Not once in all of the months she was with Pete did she ever admit how good he made her feel. More than likely because Pete never managed to make her feel how Josie did. She never experienced anything like what he gave her right now.

"Absolutely fucking perfect," he agreed with her as his body turned as hard as a board underneath her.

Then his cock swelled, stretched inside her and grew so quickly that she cried out. He stroked her hair, whispering nonsense in her ear while his scent changed, grew so musky that the air between them had to be thick enough to cut with a knife. Never had lust smelled so strong, so powerful and intense that she could drink it, taste it on her tongue as she breathed it deep into her lungs.

His cock exploded inside her. Wet heat poured deep into her womb. Her insides ripped apart, and for the briefest of seconds she worried that he had hurt her. Pain



rushed through her, but just for a moment. It passed so quickly she wasn't positive she had experienced it. Heat rushed over her and it took a moment to understand what he had done.

Josie had swollen inside her, uniting them, locking them together when he came.

Unable to slide off him, Maura worked to catch her breath while her inner thigh muscles burned. She lay spread over him, and he held her in his arms as his heart beat hard and steady underneath her.

"Your mate never swelled inside you before?" he asked after minutes passed by.

"It never felt like this."

"Have I hurt you?"

Maura laughed. She was anything but hurt, in spite of the moments of pain she experienced. "No. No, you haven't hurt me."

"Good." He didn't say anything else, just held her and breathed with a slow, steady pattern until her heart managed to match and pulse at the same rate as his.

Traditions existed concerning a male swelling inside a female. But then if she were a strong traditionalist, having sex with a male would mate them. Of course, that couldn't happen since she was already mated. If she weren't, the fact that he had come inside her, bonded them together by swelling so they couldn't separate until he resumed his normal size, would make her think he wanted more than just a good fuck from her.

If she weren't mated, it would be the first sign of him showing any kind of emotion toward her. He twitched inside her and she lifted her head, surprised at how sore every muscle inside her was. She didn't get this worn out after a hard run.

"You use different muscles," Josie said, his gaze fixed on her the moment she looked up at him.

"Have you been listening to my thoughts this whole time?"

"It's kind of hard not to. We're the only ones here." Once again his facial muscles relaxed, making him impossible to read.

She frowned, not sure what to do about being an open book for him. His cock shifted again, slowly resuming its usual size. Still stretched out on top of him with his arms wrapped protectively around her like he was in no hurry for them to part, there was only one way to know his mind.

"Then explain to me what just happened here."

Josie glanced down between them. "We just had some kick-ass sex."

"Yes. We did." Her heart started pounding so hard he had to feel it. She wasn't used to being so bold. "Why did you swell inside me?"

He lifted his gaze slowly, his lashes draping over his dark eyes as they slowly began smoldering while he took his time staring at her. "Because I wanted to," he finally said.

She moved slightly and he slid out of her. A wash of moisture rushed over her skin and she attempted moving her legs. Josie rose, holding on to her, and situated them so that she rolled to his side. Still holding her, he lowered her onto the bed, adjusting himself so that he looked down at her. For a moment she wanted to run, the urge hitting her faster than her muscles could carry her at the moment.

"And to answer the second question that you are scared to voice," he began, then licked his lips. It was almost as if he too hesitated—as if he were about to speak about something taboo. "You are no longer mated to Pete."

It took a moment for his words to hit her. Maura's mouth went dry and she realized it was because her jaw had fallen open and she was breathing heavily through her mouth. Josie brushed her hair from her face with his fingers, a gentle touch, once again belying the werewolf who seemed so closed off with his feelings.

"What did you say?" It didn't register.

For too long she wished for her freedom. With just a few words, Josie implied it was true.

"Pete is dead. You're a widow." He searched her face, like he needed to see her first reaction to his words.

She waited for her reaction as well. She should feel something. Her mate was dead. That made her a widow. Just the other day, although for some reason it seemed a lot longer, she had asked Bob to be released from her mating. He had refused her request. But Josie had fulfilled it.

"How?" She pushed away from him and then fought her leg muscles for a moment when they quivered too much for her to stand.

Strong hands took hold of her waist and Josie's powerful body pressed against her backside as he pushed her to her feet, then stood behind her, not letting go.

"It was quick, painless. Quite possibly no one knows he is dead yet." His voice rumbled behind her, sharing the facts with her without offering any details. "You might also like to know that your pack doesn't know you are missing. At this moment, you are free to return and enjoy your widow status."

"Oh." When she walked away from him, he didn't hold on to her.

Josie had given her what she wanted—freedom. That didn't explain why he had swollen inside her, marking her. If she returned to her pack right now, his scent would be all over her.

*Did you think that one through when you came inside me, wolf man?*

She didn't turn around and he didn't answer. Maura let out a sigh, deciding her question was on the table. He heard her thoughts. There wasn't any reason to voice the question. Her legs wobbled underneath her when she walked to the bathroom. Josie didn't follow her and she shut the door, then collapsed against it, staring at the small room without focusing on her surroundings.

What kind of werewolf was Josie?

Maybe he never opened up to any bitch. Possibly asking him to speak his mind was simply asking more than he could do. Maura reached for the faucet and turned on the water in the tub. A shower wouldn't wash away his scent. There were some bitches who walked around with the smell of their mate never leaving them. Maura always envied that sure indication that they had kick-ass sex on a very regular basis.

But Josie wasn't her mate. Hell, he was damned near a perfect stranger. Yet he had just given her the one thing she wanted—freedom from the shackles of her terrible mate. And then he swelled inside her. Traditions ran strong and were clear as crystal on this matter. No matter what breed they were, when a male swelled inside a female it meant they were mated—for life.

Dear Lord.

It was all too much at the moment. Adjusting the water, Maura turned on the shower and then stood under it, soaking. She doubted there was enough hot water to cleanse away all of the doubt and confusion swarming around in her brain. No matter how hard she scrubbed, it wouldn't remove his scent from her. What scared her even more was not knowing if she wanted his scent to leave her.

## Chapter Eight

Josie hung up the phone with Dimitri just as Maura came out of the shower. Steam filled the air around her, accentuating the smell of him on her. He decided not to comment on that small fact. The smell of soap and shampoo did little to hide the dominating scent.

Josie breathed in deeply, looking away so she wouldn't notice. It was the first time he smelled his mark on a bitch. Maybe at some point he would tell Maura that she was the first bitch he ever swelled in. Right now, it wouldn't help the turmoil already swimming around in her thoughts. But damn, she smelled good.

"I should have caught breakfast for us while I was out last night."

"Maybe you were a bit preoccupied." She was going to push him, pry his thoughts out of him.

If she did, she would be the first bitch who succeeded. Josie doubted he could put his thoughts into words. Too many years of not allowing his emotions to open, of mastering not feeling, would take a hell of a lot of work to reverse. Not to mention, it was better this way. He didn't feel pain if he didn't feel. Made things easier.

"How about if we go into Valle for breakfast." Dimitri wanted him to check their pack's post office box that was in Valle. The small town at the edge of their territory, a community made up predominantly of American werewolves, housed the closest post office. All official pack business was mailed there.

"Into Valle?"

"You ever been there?" He didn't question why he craved knowing everything about her. He should. Just like he should question the simple fact chewing at him that he couldn't let her go.

"American werewolves don't take too nicely to *lunewulfs*. I've never been there but I know Heidi went there once."

"I promise you will be treated with respect." Especially with his mark on her. Anyone who sniffed her out would see her as his bitch. Which, in fact, she was. He swelled in her. Traditions were clear and simply stated. His emotions and reactions to what he had done were about as clear as mud, which fucking sucked.

"Because I would be with you?"

"Possibly." He took in the jeans and sweater she wore—clothes Heidi had given her. They were snug, although her large breasts pressing against the knitted sweater made her look sexier than any bitch he ever sniffed out in the past. "We'll do some shopping too, get you anything you need."

"Okay." She gave him an odd look. Maura still ached to know his motives. *Do you want me to stay with you? Or return to my pack?*

"Do what makes you happy." He almost enjoyed her shocked expression when he answered her thoughts. She had begged him to do so earlier. He didn't have answers for all of her questions though.

When she opened her mouth, ready to press further, pry into his mind as far as he would let her go, Josie grabbed his coat and opened his front door. "I'll warm up the car. Go sit by the fire and let your hair dry some before we leave."

He closed the door on her before she could say anything else.

Valle was a busy town, and one of fairly good size. Run by American werewolves, with a few humans who were too stubborn or too stupid to leave, it offered enough modern conveniences to make it the place to go when anyone in their pack needed supplies. Malta werewolves were accepted there. Since his pack settled in the mountain, the American pack leader emphasized that their presence kept the *lunewulfs* from expanding their territory. Ollie Grayson, the American pack leader, didn't want the *lunewulfs* gaining more control and power. His pack had been here first. Arranging for the Malta werewolves to settle between the Americans and *lunewulfs* kept balance in the area. Needless to say, the *lunewulfs* were pissed as hell when the Malta werewolves settled on land they had their eyes on. The bloodlust between the two breeds seemed only to grow the longer Malta werewolves lived here.

It was all politics. For Josie, all it meant was that he got a fair bit of respect in this town. The fact that most of the American werewolves were leery of the gift and didn't understand, or know, what he was capable of made them even more polite around him. All of which worked to his advantage.

Maura picked up on most of this fairly quickly.

"There's an ATM for my bank." She pointed out her passenger window in his small four-wheel drive. "I might as well find out if my card still works."

Josie pulled into the small parking lot and stopped in front of the small drive-up ATM machine. Maura hopped out, crossing her arms quickly against the cold wind. Her hair blew off her back as she fumbled with her purse and then worked the machine. Regardless of her financial status, she needed a coat. Possibly he could return to her old den, gather some of her things. Allowing her to return to the *lunewulf* pack didn't sit well with him. Granted, he told her she could return to her den and enjoy her widow status, but swelling in her couldn't be reversed. Her pack would detect his scent on her the second they smelled her. Damn shame. Probably would be better for her to stay with him.

He watched her press buttons and contemplated how best to handle the situation he had created by mating with her. Hadn't he convinced himself the night before that simply assuring her freedom was all he planned on doing when he killed Pete? This wasn't the deal he had made with himself. The simple truth that he wanted her settled

in his gut like a rock. He clenched the steering wheel, his palms suddenly damp. Maura didn't view them as mated. He saw in her mind that she honored tradition and was more than moved by their lovemaking this morning. He was more than moved too. But emotion, feeling anything, was territory he swore he would never enter again. Mental anguish didn't heal the way a physical wound healed. He couldn't control those emotions—so as a self-imposed rule, he stayed the hell away from them.

But he was the one who swelled inside her. Josie didn't have a damn soul to blame other than himself for bonding him and Maura together. No matter what happened, she belonged to him. Now to figure out what to do about that.

Her happiness hit him before she looked his way and smiled. Holding her hair out of her face as she hurried back to the car, Maura held the cash up for him to see as she slid into the seat next to him. Even her happiness smelled damned good mixed with his scent on her.

"Pete hasn't taken my name off the account."

"Then anything you want from that den is now yours." He searched her face, waiting for her mind to register that she spoke as if Pete were still alive.

Her smile faded, briefly, as she realized the obvious. When the glow didn't return to her pretty blue eyes, something tightened painfully inside Josie.

*He's dead. I can't believe it. Like the past six months can simply be wiped away. Oh man. If only it could be that easy.*

"It's going to take some getting used to that he's really gone," she whispered, turning her attention toward the parking lot in front of them as she lowered her hand and scrunched the cash in her lap.

He touched her before thinking about doing it. "If I could take the pain from your thoughts, I would." Even the words came out of their own accord.

Something about Maura made him feel, and react to those feelings, even when he ordered himself not to. This wasn't like him. But he didn't like hearing pain and anguish in her thoughts. It affected him too.

He recoiled quickly, pulling his hand from her arm. She licked her lips, nodding quietly. His actions didn't strike her as odd. If anything, she regretted his hand no longer being on her. Her scent turned warm, like something mouthwatering being pulled from the oven. She set her jaw, looking determined. There were as many white bitches in his past as there were Malta bitches. But Maura's creamy complexion, the way her long, straight blonde hair contrasted with her intense blue eyes gave her a striking beauty that would have any male sniffing after her. Except now, when they did, the first thing they would smell was his scent seeping from her pores.

An odd sense of pride drifted over him. "There's some business to attend to before we eat or do any shopping," he added, turning to more practical matters.

"That's fine." When she looked at him, her gaze burned his flesh as she took in his body.

And her thoughts drew out his possessive side, a part of him he had considered dormant. *I hated walking down the street next to Pete, knowing the whole pack pitied me or thought me an idiot. But to walk next to Josie...*

"I don't know your last name."

Her comment took him off guard. "Balzon. Josie Balzon."

"I'm Maura Wagner." She laughed, although it sounded dry and smelled nervous. "Or maybe now I'm Maura DeBeaux again."

"I know who you are, little bitch."

He looked briefly into her blue eyes, which once again glowed like they did during sex. One whiff of her and any werewolf would know her last name – Balzon.

"I guess it does sound funny asking about last names when I've been in your den with you for the past twenty-four hours now."

He wanted her to continue staying with him. "You can ask me anything."

"Oh. I know that." She glanced at him. *You just won't always answer*, she told him with her thoughts.

He decided to prove her right by not commenting.

The post office didn't take more than a minute. Putting the bundle of pack-related mail in his backseat, Josie then pulled Maura to him, enjoying her surprised look as she pulled her door closed.

"The shopping center here is predominantly run by werewolves," he told her. "As well as the restaurant where we'll have breakfast."

Maura collapsed against him, but then straightened, running her fingers over his chest as she gave him her attention.

"No one will question you being with me. I guarantee it. You will show no fear, only trust and confidence. Do you understand?"

"I know how to behave in public," she whispered, her gaze dropping to his mouth.

"Maura. My scent is dripping off you."

"You smell like me too, wolf man." Even though her expression was defiant, her mind raced with nervous, anxious guesses as to what he meant by his comment.

"And while we're together—" he began.

But she interrupted him. "We're going to act like we're mated."

"Would you rather I present you as my personal slut?"

Her eyes turned bluer than a cloudless summer sky. And the way her mouth formed a small, perfect circle sent all blood draining straight to his cock. The car filled with the smell of his lust, which turned her thoughts sultrier.

"I'm no male's personal slut," she hissed.

"Your title, or rank, won't be questioned."

*But they will think I'm your mate.* Her thoughts were so clear it was like she spoke out loud. *Is that what you want them to think?* The way she looked at him, devouring his face with sensual, probing eyes, almost had him opening his mouth to comment. Maura ached to know what he thought.

Allowing his feelings to surface briefly, warmth washed over him like a blinding sun appearing suddenly from behind dense clouds. The urge to demand her submission, force her to accept the traditions werewolves honored no matter their breed and say they were mates overwhelmed him. It took him off guard how strongly he wanted this. Anything or anyone he felt strongly about would inevitably be destroyed and cause unbearable pain. That was how it had always been.

Josie grabbed Maura, taking her head in his hands and tilting her so he could devour her mouth. For a moment he sensed her fight, which made his blood boil. Carnal, hardcore desire ripped him apart inside. Fuck proper society and the lame assholes who turned their heads and pretended they didn't smell why tradition and laws were what made werewolves so much stronger and better than any other species on this planet. He wanted this bitch. Already he had killed for her. Her body screamed for him. No matter that they were together now for only a day. The more primal, basic nature that swam strong and deep in his blood told him she belonged to him.

Josie nibbled at her lips, breathed in her growl when she stiffened initially and then her groan when she submitted and relaxed into him. Her mind was a whirlwind of thoughts, and they rushed in a crazed circle around his overheated brain. Every breath he took filled his lungs with her rich scent. He drank her in, devoured all she offered and impaled her mouth with his.

Letting go of her head, he dragged his fingers down her hair. She moaned, whimpered when he pulled on it, then cried out when he grabbed her breasts and tweaked her nipples.

His cock almost exploded in his jeans. Maybe one too many blood vessels popped in his brain. Maura did something no other bitch ever did to him. He opened his eyes and stared with blurred vision at her kiss-swollen, moist lips. They were parted and the tips of her teeth were a bit more pointed than they were a moment ago. Her long blonde hair was tousled around her face.

Not once did her thoughts turn manipulative. There was no agenda. Her actions weren't designed to trap him or discover what made him growl or push him to change. Maura's thoughts melted his exterior with their sincerity and simple desire to be loved, honored for who she was, and to give the same.

What he wouldn't do to have a bitch like her by his side. Lay his kill at her feet. Keep her warm on snowy nights and bask in the sun on warm days.

Maura was that bitch.

He stared at her.

She opened her eyes. "What?" she whispered, her mind still soft and warm with sultry images of him.



Josie opened his mouth to tell her. Not knowing how to express emotions he rarely allowed to surface put him in a position he seldom experienced. Lack of control.

"Nothing."

She sniffed the air and pulled away from him. He didn't lie so she didn't smell one. There were no words to explain what was in his head.

*He doesn't know how to express his feelings. What do I want with a male like that?*

He didn't have time to put his guard around his heart before her thoughts ripped into it.

"Let's go." He snapped at her harder than he meant to. But damn it. Like he could change for her. And shouldn't love be about not changing? About accepting a mate for who and what they were?

"No!" Maura grabbed his arm, her fingers digging into muscle.

Josie looked down at her fingernails that pressed dangerously close to puncturing his flesh through his coat. Slowly, he raised his gaze, glaring at her. Now his heart was in check, his emotions nicely tucked away where they belonged, safe from harm and pain.

*If you won't share your feelings with me then I won't have any feelings either.* Fire burned in her eyes, turning them steel blue with silver shreds sparking around her pupils. She pressed her lips together, appearing indifferent to the spicy smell of anger that quickly filled the inside of the car. *Damn it! No! I'm not going to quit feeling simply because you're a coward and scared to feel what is growing between us.*

"I'm not a coward," he growled, answering her thoughts before he could stop himself.

"I'm not going anywhere and playing like we're mates until you start sharing what is going on in that bullheaded brain of yours." Maura had a temper. And if it flared any further his eyes would water from the spicy smell that actually drowned out his scent on her.

"Don't push me, little bitch. Unless you would like me to drive to your pack and drop you off at your den? I'm sure I could find my way there easier this time."

"I'm sure you could. And it wouldn't surprise me a bit if you're just as good at chasing a bitch away as you are at fucking her until she reeks of your scent."

"I promise you there is no other bitch who has ever worn my scent."

She opened her mouth, but then closed it, something changing in her expression that worried him.

"You've never swelled in a bitch before?" she asked quietly.

"No."

"Then why did you with me?"

"I don't know."

"Like hell you don't." She shook his arm and slammed the dash with her other hand. "Tell me why you did it! Why did you mark me as your mate but then demand that I *play* like we're mated?"

Josie took her wrist, removing her hand from his arm with little effort. She ground her teeth together, watching him easily slide her fingers from his coat.

"I'm not playing anything, little bitch. I'm offering protection. Don't ask for more than what exists."

*But you do have more. I can see it in you. "And I can smell it on you." You hear everything that I am, all of my thoughts, my fears, my hopes and dreams. "I won't ever try to hide my thoughts from you. Not that I'm sure I would know how. Can't you even exert a little effort to share what is going on inside your head?" Or are you not strong enough to take on something as harmless as feelings?*

"Feelings can be very harmful."

She turned, twisting her body so she faced him. Absently brushing her hair over her shoulder, Maura gave him an appraising look while her thoughts bounced all over the place. "Just because you've been hurt doesn't mean you should quit feeling. If that were true, then I'm sure as hell more qualified to quit feeling than you could possibly be. Is that what you want? For me to shut down like you have?"

"No. What I want is to get some food without you baring your fangs in public. We'll discuss this later." He turned, starting the car.

"Later," she mumbled. *Maybe I'll agree to have sex with him when he agrees to tell me why he swelled inside me and marked me but now wants to pretend it didn't happen.*

Josie squealed his tires when he took off from the post office. Maura grabbed her door handle, giving him a quick look.

"Okay, wolf man. I haven't figured out yet if you respond more when I think or when I speak. But at least I know you're hearing me when you react."

"I haven't ignored you for one second since we've been together."

"I can smell the kind of attention you want to give me. What I want to know is why."

"You must know you're hot as hell." It wasn't more than a few blocks before they reached the restaurant. A werewolf establishment known for not burning their meat, Josie had eaten there a few times, and conducted some business with their pack leader as well. Every nose in the place would be sniffing up a storm when he entered with a fucking hot *lunewolf* at his side.

Maura stared out the window as he slowed and then pulled into a parking stall. "So you fucked me and then marked me because you think I'm sexy."

"Your smell drives me wild."

"Now? Or before?"

Josie turned off the car and got out, sucking cold air deep into his lungs. Maura wasn't going to drop this. He already told her he didn't know why he had marked her. That answer wasn't good enough for her.

He reached her side of the car as she opened the door. Pulling her into his arms, he stared into those deep blue eyes. It made him nuts that she worried so much about his feelings and motivation behind fucking her.

"Everything about you has distracted me since I first laid eyes on you months ago," he confessed.

Damn. Just that little bit and her face lit up. "Was it so hard to tell me that?" she asked.

"Yup." He turned her toward the restaurant and then slapped her ass.

She squealed and grabbed her hair, twisting it into a ponytail before looking up and glaring at him. "Brute," she growled. Her thoughts told him otherwise. She loved the attention, the way her body distracted him and the way he noticed her.

Maura held her head high when they entered the werewolf establishment. *They all think I belong to him. It won't be so bad playing along like this for a while. Josie is a hell of a lot better catch than any werewolf I've ever known in the past.* She put him in the same situation. Possessiveness almost made him swell as he placed his hand on her back and led her to one of the tables.

Josie let his gaze settle on the males who turned curious stares their way, sniffing the air. Obviously a Malta male and *lunewolf* bitch entering an American werewolf restaurant would cause chatter. But most here knew him. Their attention quickly diverted to Maura.

The young waitress hesitated before Gus Johnson, the werewolf who ran the place, growled at her and sent her their way.

"Good morning." She snapped her gum and poured coffee for both of them. Her hand barely shook as her pale eyes traveled over his body more than once. "What would you like?"

The waitress addressed him, her back almost to Maura. But Maura answered quickly before he got a word in.

"Steak and eggs for both of us." She ordered for him, but her attention was hard on the young waitress who now gave Maura the once-over. Maura laid her claim on him, addressing the female and demanding acknowledgment, just as any mate would do for her male. "Both steaks rare and scramble the eggs."

He was so damned proud he almost burst. The waitress gave Maura a curt nod then turned and left them. Maura reached across the table and ran her fingernail down the back of his hand. Every tiny hair, even those on his fingers, stood at attention.

"Treat me like I'm not even here," she growled under her breath.

"My little bitch has some spunk to her." He couldn't help grinning at her.

*Your little bitch?* She liked the way that sounded but diverted her attention to his hand. He listened to her thoughts as she tried analyzing why it mattered so much to her that she be recognized as his bitch when they were practically strangers.

*You're listening to my thoughts, aren't you?*

He squeezed her hand in answer. Lifting her gaze, her blue eyes sparkled as if she was enjoying a good joke. He wished she heard what was in his head. Maybe then she wouldn't get her hackles up when he didn't tell her what was on his mind. He'd never tried teaching the gift to anyone else. Honestly, teaching anyone else to do what he did never crossed his mind before now.

"I take it you're a regular here."

"It's a good place to hear what's going on with the American pack."

"And that's your job?"

He shrugged. "I wouldn't call it a job but it's what I do."

"Do you keep an eye on the *lunewulf* pack too?"

"Sometimes." Very few understood what little effort was involved in sniffing out the packs surrounding the Malta territory. "I don't have to tell you that I've never sat in one of your restaurants and casually enjoyed breakfast."

Maura glanced around at the few werewolves awake before noon. Every one of them wondered what the hell she was doing with him. Josie didn't have to watch how quickly most of them ate so they could get out of here and spread word that apparently Josie Balzon had mated with one hell of a hot-looking *lunewulf* bitch.

"It's not that we're antisocial." Maura would defend her own kind. He would have thought less of her if she didn't. "American and Malta werewolves don't wish to work with us. If they did, we would have no problem with any of you walking through our pack." She pointed at him, flashes of her past snapping in her mind like quick glimpses of partial videos. "Just last week some *Cariboo lunewulfs* were in town. And from what I heard, they'd been in Cuchara before they visited our pack."

"Where were they from?" He hadn't heard of any *Cariboo* in the area, let alone werewolves moving around the humans. Cuchara wasn't known as a werewolf-friendly community. The humans who lived there vandalized Malta territory and *lunewulf* territory in the past, managing to kill several members of their pack.

Maura raised a shoulder lazily, but her expression remained alert. She guessed quickly that any werewolf activity out of the norm put him on the alert. "My point is that they were welcomed and there wasn't any fighting. At least none that I heard of through the pack grapevine. I never personally saw them."

When their waitress returned with plates of food and more coffee, the two of them fell into a comfortable silence. At least there was no speaking. Josie ate slowly, focusing more on the thoughts going on around him than on his meat. The food was as good as always, but somehow eating with Maura made the meal better than any of the other hundred breakfasts he'd eaten here before.

The door to the restaurant opened and Josie made eye contact with Ollie Grayson, the pack leader in Valle. The American werewolf rested his gaze on Maura's backside, and his radar immediately kicked in. Everything he'd been focused on when he'd entered the restaurant faded as he picked up the *lunewulf* bitch's scent.

Ollie sauntered toward them, ignoring his pack, who straightened in their seats around them. The place quickly got silent and Maura paused, her fork with a piece of meat on it in midair as she glanced around her, sniffing the air and looking worried when she met Josie's gaze. The air in the place settled with the hard smells of anticipation and concern. Everyone waited to see what Ollie would do and say to Josie and his female companion.

"Josie." Ollie nodded his head slightly when he reached the table and looked down at him with a very serious expression.

Josie offered the American pack leader his respect. Making sure his expression appeared as relaxed as his scent, he gestured to the empty chair at their table. "Here to eat?"

Ollie pulled the metal chair away from the table, its legs scraping over the linoleum floor. If the squeaking sound hit a few werewolves' ears a bit hard, it simply served as a reminder for them to focus on their own damned business. Josie didn't ignore any of their thoughts though, instead putting himself on alert and staying focused on everything around them as well as the intimate setting at their table.

"I didn't get an announcement that you'd mated." Ollie looked at Maura, staring at her without reservation. The werewolf would assume traditions were being honored. Maura reeked of his scent, and he had her out in public, presenting her at his side. It wouldn't surprise him if by the end of the day, all three packs heard that Josie Balzon now had a *lunewulf* mate. Might prove interesting when Dimitri got the news.

Josie would give Maura this, she didn't balk under the scrutinizing appraisal but straightened, putting her fork down and then folding her hands in her lap. She offered Ollie the softest of smiles. He almost burst with pride as her scent grew richer, an aromatic mixture of curiosity and his scent on her. Not once did she look his way.

Her thoughts weren't as composed. *Please don't let him contact my pack leader. Bob can't find out like this. He'll explode.*

Josie agreed with her on that one. "We haven't formally made an announcement yet. Figured we'd enjoy some breakfast first. I told Maura this was the best food in the mountains."

"Maura?" Ollie questioned.

"I'm Maura DeBeaux. It's an honor to meet you." She extended her slender hand, which Ollie took, gave a firm shake, then brought the back of her hand to his mouth, faking a kiss while getting a better smell of her.

"DeBeaux? Your den is part of the *lunewulf* pack?" He let go of her hand and turned his attention to Josie. "She is returning to that pack?"

Josie offered his most chivalrous smile and wasn't daunted when Ollie simply raised one eyebrow.

"Allow me to present Maura Balzon. We just made our decision early this morning." He held up his coffee cup, looking away from Ollie long enough to grab their waitress's attention—not that it was hard to do. Like everyone else in the restaurant, she was already watching him. "We're still on our first cups of coffee, and I admit Maura and I had a long night last night."

Ollie leaned back in his chair, crossing his thick arms over an even thicker chest. "Good to hear, Balzon. Real good to hear." He waited while their waitress refilled everyone's cup, including the one in front of Ollie. He took a long sip, then relaxed again, nodding his approval. "I like seeing young werewolves stick to the formality of our traditions. There are too many bitches these days running around with some male's scent on her that she has no intention of seeing again. I wish you both good hunting."

Ollie finished his coffee with a couple of swallows then stood, patting Josie on the shoulder. "Check in when you have time. I'll leave you and your bitch to enjoy your breakfast."

## Chapter Nine

Maura needed to run. Tear over the mountains with all the speed she could master and simply feel the cold air bite at her flesh. She would run like that until all thoughts torturing her brain slowly faded.

Too much happened too fast.

In just over twenty-four hours, Pete dumped her outside her pack, Josie found her, killed her mate and had now just announced their mating to the American pack leader. No matter that he wasn't her pack leader, Josie's announcement made it stick.

Maura wasn't a bitch to turn her tail on werewolf tradition.

Unless they didn't work. She acknowledged just the other day, when she approached her own pack leader and begged him to release her from the foul stench of her mate's brutal claws that laws should only be binding if they worked. That wasn't disgracing laws and traditions that she'd honored all her life. She was simply trying to save her hide.

And for good cause. Hadn't Pete dropped her ass out in the cold, more or less announcing to her that he was throwing her away?

But now...

A good, hard run would make it easier to think.

And she needed to think without sharing every thought that popped into her conscious mind with Josie.

Maura ground her teeth together when they walked out of the restaurant, no more wanting to shop than she wanted to spend more time in this pack. Josie was in her head. She knew he was by the way he walked silently at her side. His expression sobered with small lines forming alongside his eyes when he focused on other people's minds. In less than a day, she'd picked that up about him.

Her eagerness to know everything that made this werewolf tick bugged the crap out of her. Although deep in her mind she knew exactly why she wanted to know everything about him. Josie moved her more than any werewolf ever had. Whether she cared to acknowledge the truth or not, she was falling hard for him—real hard.

If only he would let her know what he thought about all of this.

Possibly he seriously didn't know how to share his thoughts. That would be rather ironic—a werewolf who could hear everyone's thoughts but couldn't hear his own mind.

There was so much she didn't know about him. Which was perfectly normal. She'd known the werewolf—really known him—for one day. Hardly enough time to understand what made a male get his hackles up.

Granted, there were still matings that took place in the twenty-first century where males and bitches hardly knew each other before setting up their den together. Werewolves could be damned antiquated sometimes. And for the most part, she didn't have a problem with any of it. She was proud of who and what she was. And she always would be.

Josie opened her car door and she slid onto the cold seat, wrapping her arms around herself against the frigid temperatures and watching while he took long strides around the front of the car to the driver's side.

Josie Balzon was the sexiest damned werewolf she'd ever laid eyes on. She loved his broad, muscular shoulders and chest, his slim waistline, his dark skin and straight black hair that barely lifted off his shoulders with the crisp wind blowing around him. Everything about him was the ideal combination to create perfection.

She might very well have found her soul mate, she thought when he slid in next to her and closed his door. Josie looked at her, his dark, almost black eyes glowing possessively and with a determined edge that tightened her gut.

*I need time to think.* She emphasized the words in her mind, wondering if maybe he didn't hear her thoughts as well when he was outside the car and had focused only on the soul mate part when he climbed in next to her.

"I need to go to my den." She held her hand up when his expression hardened. "Josie. I can't just walk away from everything I had, everything I owned."

"There very well could be a dead *lunewulf* lying on your living room floor." His tone was colder than ice. Determination made his scent richer.

Maura nodded, her stomach twisting over the thought of having to deal with properly burying Pete. His den would be outraged. Not that she should care. None of them ever thought much of her.

"Ignoring him in death would only make his den right about me. Regardless of what kind of male he was, he still deserves a proper funeral."

Josie looked away from her, his jaw a hard line of determination when he stared out the front window without starting his car. "You'll go and gather your things."

Her heart skipped a beat, relief washing over her when she realized she wouldn't have to fight him just to return to her den for a bit.

"That's fine. There isn't anything for me in that pack anyway."

"We just announced our mating," he said, his teeth clamped together and his voice gravelly. "You will not walk away from me now and make me out to be a fool."

"You would keep me around now simply to save face in this pack and your own?" She glared at him, astonished, frustrated that the thought hadn't hit her before. "Take me to my den, Josie. I won't disgrace your precious reputation."

Her tone bit with sarcasm. She knew it. Muscles pressed against his coat, making his arms look even thicker. She shivered and watched his fingers tighten and then release the steering wheel.



Damn it. At the least she could grab her heavy down coat that Pete hadn't allowed her time to put on before throwing her out of his den. Like she wanted to simply run back to that horrid place. But her things were there—her clothes, her personal items. She wouldn't have some other bitch going through and sorting out her stuff.

Josie shifted in the seat, stretching his arm, and her heart exploded. His brooding gaze told her nothing when he gave her attention. But when he slid out of his coat, she exhaled in spite of herself.

"I would never strike you, never hurt you in anger, no matter how bad you piss me off." His baritone gave her chills when he leaned toward her and wrapped his coat around her. Josie rested his knuckles underneath her chin, rubbing her skin while he held on to the collar of the coat. "I will take you to your old den. We can get whatever things you want to have. But then we leave. That asshole's den can plan his funeral without you. There is no one there you need to impress. They had their chance with you and fucked it up."

His coat reeked of him and every breath she took filled her lungs with leather and Josie—a dangerous combination when he gazed at her so possessively. She lowered her gaze, trying to keep her heart from pattering a mile a minute. In spite of how cold it was outside, suddenly wrapped in his heavy coat, she swore sweat broke out over her skin. He was so damned close, so powerful and convinced of how things would be. Would it be so terrible to risk her heart once again and lay claim on such a perfect fucking male?

But he still hadn't shared why mating with her meant so much to him. All he'd said was that running from him now would be an embarrassment and a humiliation to both of them. Like a werewolf with Josie's powers and good looks had a damned clue what it felt or smelled like to be embarrassed or humiliated. She doubted he'd ever experienced either degrading sensation.

"You may not feel I need to impress anyone." Focusing on what she needed to do helped calm her frazzled nerves. No way would she fill the car with the smell of her lust. "But it will always matter to me that my pack knows I do what is right. Pete was a prick. He made me despise him with his foul stench and indifference toward me. But I will never be like that—never. It's the right thing to do to return to my den and handle my affairs before leaving."

Josie rubbed the bottom of her chin until she looked up at him. When she did, he pressed his lips to hers. The heat from his mouth scalded her insides, sending all hopes of keeping the smell of her lust hidden right out the window. He tightened his grip on the coat collar, dragging her closer to him while devouring her mouth.

Maura cried out, which sounded more like a whimper in his mouth when he impaled her with his tongue. The muscles in his arms twitched under her fingers. She ran her palms up his shoulders and then tangled her fingers in his straight, smooth hair. It was so thick, like coarse silk, and she grabbed on, tugging him closer until he let out a low, dangerous-sounding growl.

Her insides exploded. Heat washed over her, making her flesh tingle. Her pussy swelled and throbbed painfully while a pressure built inside her that made it impossible to think straight.

When he let go of the coat, breaking the kiss and leaving her panting, Josie reached inside and practically pulled her onto his lap in spite of the limited space. His large body left little room between him and the steering wheel, yet he wrapped her into him.

"Your desire to do what is right in spite of the wrongs done to you makes you even more beautiful." He brushed her hair from her face with one hand while holding her tightly, his arm bulging with muscle that was hard as rock. "I will take you to your old den. And I'll be there with you every minute that you're there, until you are satisfied that we can leave."

"It might be better if you just dropped me off." She tried for an understanding smile, praying he saw into her thoughts and knew she was sincere. "I'm not going to embarrass you or humiliate you. You have my word. But I'm very safe in my own pack. You and I both know Malta werewolves aren't very welcome among the *lunewulfs*."

"I am not leaving you in a pack who turned their backs on you when you howled for help," he growled.

His intense smell was enough to show her she wouldn't argue her way out of this one. Josie had his mind made up. Apparently convinced she saw his side of things, Josie placed her back on her side of the front seat and started the car. They weren't even out of Valle when his cell phone rang. She glanced over to see him stare at the phone and then send the call to voicemail.

His expression remained etched in stone when he tossed the phone on the seat between them. "Dimitri called me already," he mumbled. "He can wait until I speak to him in person."

"You can't hear a person's thoughts when you talk to them on the phone," she guessed.

"I hate cell phones."

That confirmed her guess. "I'll remember that about you."

Maura's stomach twisted in knots and there was no hiding the smell of her nervousness as they drove down the quiet streets of her pack. In spite of the freezing temperatures, the sun shone brightly, its rays glaring off the surrounding snow-covered mountains. All the streets were well-shoveled though, with hard-packed piles of snow lining the roads. Josie took his time driving through town, never once asking for directions and moving so slowly it was like he wanted them to be noticed. All it would take was one pup spotting the dark-skinned werewolf behind the driver's wheel next to her to send the pack into a frenzy.

Maura just knew the inevitable would happen.

"I don't have a key," she announced, the realization dawning on her when Josie pulled into her cleared driveway. He parked next to Pete's car, the one he'd used to haul her out into the mountains. "We'll draw even more attention to ourselves if we break into my den."

"The front door is unlocked." Josie sounded so confident that she gave him an odd look.

He barely glanced her way before climbing out on his side and heading around the front of the car. Faded blue jeans hugged his long, thick, muscular legs. He wore the flannel shirt tucked in, showing off his powerful-looking chest and broad shoulders. The view distracted her for a moment before she hurried out on her side, knowing they'd do better if they got inside quickly. Josie's unfamiliar car driving down the road and then parking in her driveway would have half the neighborhood sniffing at their windows before long.

She knew their time was limited before someone notified Bob that they were here. Yet another pack leader she'd be dealing with today.

Josie growled at her the moment she got out of the car. "I'll check the place out first."

"This is my den," she protested instantly.

"Was your den." His growl turned fiercer.

Maura glanced up and down her street, sniffing the air of the neighborhood she called home for the past six months. Everything looked the way it always did. Josie moved ahead of her to the front door. Just as he reached it, the door swung open. Maura swore it opened of its own accord. But she couldn't be sure.

At the same instant, Leona Torngreen, her neighbor to the south, walked around the side of her den. She shielded her eyes against the sun and sniffed the air.

"Maura, I haven't seen you in a few days." Leona hesitated, but her expression and scent didn't show any surprise or fear.

Josie disappeared inside the den. Maura glanced his way, but lost him in the darkness of her living room. She turned her attention to Leona, who trudged over unshoveled snow between their dens toward her.

"I haven't seen you either." She hated the sensation of feeling trapped. If she ran into her den, Leona would follow and see Josie. But if she stood where she was, the bitch would smell his scent on her.

There weren't really any options other than face the inevitable. The sinking, twisting pain in her gut didn't help matters much.

"I've been away for a day or so." She wished she'd made time to plot out a believable story to explain her being gone. The truth wasn't so ugly, except for Pete. And that wasn't her fault. If he hadn't dumped her outside *lunewulf* territory, he would still be alive. "I just got home."

"What in the world are you wearing?" Leona wrinkled her nose and twisted a blonde curl around her finger as she studied Maura.

Maura glanced down at the oversized leather coat that Josie had wrapped around her. Admittedly, she drowned in it, but cuddled up inside almost made it feel like she had a shield surrounding her. A black leather, thick, heavy shield that smelled strongly of one powerful, dominating Malta werewolf.

Leona's pup crashed in the snow and started wailing at the same moment that Paul Wagner pulled up in front of their den. A strong breeze carried a foul stench on it and Maura's gut turned so quickly from the nauseating smell that she wanted to puke.

She turned and looked at Paul and swore his mouth dropped open. Quickly he picked up his cell phone, and instead of getting out of his truck, he made a phone call. When his attention moved to the strange car in her driveway, he put his truck in gear and moved forward, his expression turning menacing as he blocked the drive.

The stench in the air increased, and as she watched Paul, it dawned on her that she smelled Pete, Paul's littermate, her mate...deceased mate. His dead body probably had her den smelling like a burial service after a massacre of werewolves.

For a moment she worried she might throw up. Death was part of life. And for werewolves, it was something seen more often than not. She witnessed her fair share of killing and burial ceremonies when she ran from pack to pack in her earlier years. But witnessing it before didn't make it any easier to handle now. And she had yet to see Pete's dead body.

Something told her that possibly Paul already knew Pete was dead. Either that or he knew Pete had dumped Maura up in the mountains. It wasn't like him to sit in his truck and make phone calls instead of getting out and talking to her. Or hitting on her. Paul wasn't a hell of a lot better male than Pete had been.

"I thought I heard something about you," Leona called out, now standing between their dens as she saved her pup from wiping out in the snow again. "What's that?" Maura stood in snow up to her shins. She moved closer to her front door, then kicked her boots against the shoveled walk. Maybe she wouldn't ever return to this den, but good breeding prevented her from entering with snow caked on her shoes and the bottom of her jeans.

"My mate told me last night that you were gone. Something he heard from your mate." Her quizzical expression showed she had already received part of a juicy story and now ached to get her pup under control so she could get the rest of the details.

"I can only imagine what Pete might have told him." She started toward her front door, praying she wouldn't throw up when she entered her den. The smell was nauseating.

"Do you smell something?" Leona cocked her head and sniffed the air. She pushed her curly hair away from her face and frowned at Maura. "You have to be able to smell that. It smells like death."

Josie appeared in the doorway, standing in the shadows so that neither Leona nor Paul saw him. He'd found one of her suitcases and had it in his hand. In his other hand he carried a brown paper sack. "I think I have everything that was yours out of your bathroom and bedroom. Who is in the truck?" He looked over her head toward the street and nodded.

"That is Pete's littermate. He just pulled up and I don't know why he isn't getting out of the truck."

"He's scared to get out." Josie cocked his head and squinted, sounding disgusted. "But at least now you have satisfaction in knowing that your deceased mate will have his burial. His den will handle matters. Are you ready?"

"We're just going to leave?" She stepped toward her den but Josie blocked her ability to see inside. The smell turned her stomach with enough severity to bring bile to her throat.

"Take these and go to the car." He pushed her suitcase and the paper sack at her, forcing her to take them while pushing her backward away from her old den. "If there's anything you want that isn't among these things, now is the time to tell me. Look things over when you get in the car. Go—now."

Maura didn't like being bullied. She didn't smell the pompous, arrogant smell that Pete would get when he told her what to do. Josie wasn't ordering her around to get his rocks off. He didn't even focus on her. He appeared sprung tight, as if at any moment he might fly right over her and tumble into battle. And that very well might be what would happen.

"Go now, Maura," he said more gently this time, his dark eyes burrowing into hers. "Take your things and wait in the car. Everything will be okay. I promise."

"How can you promise such a thing?" she demanded. "Unless there's a hell of a lot more to these powers that you have, everything is not going to be okay."

"Now isn't the time to question me."

The snow crunched alongside her den and Maura turned quickly. Leona held her pup in her arms and stopped as she stared at Maura's face. She could only guess what her expression must have looked like to Leona. Probably something bordering on shock by the look on Leona's face.

"Who are you talking to?" Leona whispered, smelling suspicious. "Is everything okay?"

"When Pete told your mate that I was gone, did he say where I went?"

Leona wrinkled her brow. "That's a crazy question."

"I know it is. And I was just curious," she said. Then, lowering her voice and ignoring Josie's growl, she added, "I thought maybe you might know what he told the pack. I mean if he told your mate that I was gone, he had to give a reason why I wasn't here anymore."

"I didn't think about it." Leona looked terribly confused, which made sense since Maura knew she wasn't making a bit of sense. "I guess maybe I didn't think it was permanent or anything. Something is going on though, isn't it?" She hugged her pup closer to her and tried peering into Maura's den. Immediately she stepped back, gagging and wrinkling her nose. "God. It stinks in there."

"I'm sure that's why Paul is here." Maura pointed to the street where Paul still sat in his truck.

"It smells like you're in trouble, Maura. Do you want to come over to my den? I can call my mate. He could be here in minutes if needed." She spoke faster and faster until she finally stopped and dragged in a deep breath of cold air. "I know you two had problems," she added, whispering again.

"I'll be fine." Maura adjusted her hold on her suitcase and the bag filled with her toiletries. "You should get your pup out of the cold though."

Maura turned toward the car, but glanced over her shoulder and saw that Leona took her time backing up while she studied Maura's den and Paul, who still sat in his truck out in the street. He had his phone to his ear and watched her with piercing blue eyes that had always seemed cold and hateful to Maura. He never gave Leona his attention but shifted when Maura opened her car door and put the suitcase inside. His truck blocked their ability to get out of the driveway, and although Josie had a four-wheel drive, the snow in the yard was piled high and packed hard. It would be risky trying to tear out of there.

Josie walked out of her old den and at the same time Paul jumped out of his truck.

"Get in the car, Maura," Josie growled.

"Did you kill my littermate?" Paul pointed an accusing finger, picking up his pace as he headed toward Josie.

Josie stopped, tilting his head slightly and studying Paul Wagner, who slowed his pace a bit when Josie gave him his complete attention. "Maura deserved to have widow status," he said calmly, as if his explanation would appease Paul's anger.

Maura stood on the passenger side with her door open, looking over the roof of the car at the two males shouldering off like they would attack at any moment. As much time as Paul took talking on the phone before getting out of his truck, he probably had a posse for backup that would show up any time.

Paul looked ready to explode. "You stand here and admit it without a smell on you! What kind of coward disgraces a den by killing a male with a surprise attack? Are you too much of a pussy to announce a challenge? Maybe Malta werewolves hide behind magic so the world can't see that they're nothing but cowards."

Maura flinched, chewing her lower lip to the point where she tasted blood. Tiny hairs rose to attention down her neck while she watched Josie. He was a good six inches taller than Paul and at least fifty pounds heavier, if not more. With his dark skin and hair, muscles bulging everywhere, he looked more dangerous at that moment than

she'd ever seen him look in the short time they'd known each other. More than likely she was about to find out if Josie had a short fuse or not.

"What kind of den teaches its males that it's okay to throw a bitch out on the side of the road when she's grown tired of abuse and adultery? Or is it that *lunewulfs* know no honor?" Josie didn't wait for an answer but turned toward his car, intentionally ignoring Paul. He opened his door, appearing a bit too relaxed when Paul hurried toward him. Josie nodded to her and then climbed into the car just when Paul reached out and tried to grab Josie's shirt.

Maura slid into the car quickly, catching sight of Paul's hand on Josie's arm. He lost his grasp, or let go, when Josie slid behind the wheel.

"And for the record," Josie added. "I didn't sneak up on him. He was getting ready to see some bitch—I'm sure you can tell who when you check his cell phone—and we chatted briefly before I snapped his neck."

"Motherfucker! You're not going to get out of this pack alive," Paul hissed.

Josie reached for his door handle to close his door. "You better catch your truck. Would be a damned shame for it to end up wrecked."

"What?" Paul looked toward his truck and Maura turned in her seat in time to see it start moving down the road, as if it had just been knocked into gear.

Josie waited until it was out of the way, then backed easily out of the driveway. Paul cursed loudly, almost hopping over the deep piles of snow to catch up with his truck before it picked up speed.

"Did you make his truck do that?" she whispered, although she wasn't sure why she kept her voice down.

"I thought about simply lifting it up and dropping it on his head, but that might have been viewed as a bit immature." He actually gave her a wicked grin.

Josie wasn't upset at all. None of Paul's verbal abuse fazed him. It fit Josie's nature that a game of insults and humiliation wouldn't appeal to him. He was a werewolf who placed honor and tradition over everything else. Suddenly it made sense that he wouldn't challenge Pete. To do so would honor Pete, and Josie wouldn't do that to a male he believed had abused his mate so badly.

Maura watched Paul catch up with his truck and grab the driver's side door handle just before they turned the corner and headed toward the highway. Josie was one of a kind. Gorgeous, powerful and confident, and full of more morals than possibly even she possessed.

"What all can you do?" she asked.

"You mean with the gift?"

"With your powers. Or yeah. Your gift."

"Basically I can hear what those around me are thinking and I can move things."

"No matter how big those things are?"

"When I'm moving something with my mind, weight or size has nothing to do with it."

"Damn."

"For the record, we're not going to make it out of your pack without further confrontation."

"We're not?" She glanced around outside, but then turned her attention to Josie. "How do you know that?"

"Paul Wagner is an idiot. But he did call his pack leader, who I've met briefly before and give credit for not being an idiot at all."

"Bob is a pretty smart male."

"You need to tell me now if we will announce our being mated to your pack leader." Josie glanced over at her. His expression was serious and his scent unreadable. "I will allow that to be your call."

"Do you want me to talk to him?"

"I will talk to him. But I'll only tell him we're mated if you want me to."

Maura stared at him. Josie followed every tradition on the book. More than likely if they ran into her pack leader, she could stay in the car and prevent her scent from being picked up. Not to mention wearing his huge leather coat hid her smell to some extent. Anyone sniffing her out would assume she smelled like Josie because she wore his coat. But if they were to mate under normal, conventional means, the male would approach the pack leader and ask his permission to have the bitch for his mate. Josie just suggested he would do that, if she consented.

If she didn't consent, she could still leave with Josie, but on less honorable terms. Josie just offered her the opportunity to save face within her pack. And if she agreed, her scent on him wouldn't get him in as much trouble—she hoped.

"Talk to him," she said quietly.

Josie reached over and brushed his thumb down the edge of her jawbone. "I will not discuss some façade with him. Not with your previous pack leader. In his eyes, he still decides your affairs. Once I announce our mating and request his approval, the mating sticks."

He looked away from her quickly, and just as fast put both his hands on the steering wheel. Her mind whirled with how serious Josie's expression was when he'd told her they would be mated. She stared out the front window of his car, her stomach twisting fiercely with apprehension, when two other cars cut them off at the intersection.

Maura immediately recognized members of her pack. "It's Steve Murdock and Willie Rafter."

"Friends of yours?" Josie asked, slowing the car when both *lunewulf* males stopped in the middle of the road so that the only thing Josie could do was put it in reverse and attempt to turn around.



"They're okay. Steve went out with Heidi before she met the male in your pack. And Willie has never been rude to me or anything."

"Stay in the car. I'll find out if your pack leader is on his way."

"Maybe if I talk to them..."

Josie stopped his car and gave her his attention, ignoring the two males who slowly got out of their cars. "Sitting here of your own will makes it look like you want to be here," he said quietly, those dark eyes of his glowing as he leaned in to her. Slowly, he took her lower lip between his teeth and then scraped her lip before releasing it. "Do you want to stay with this pack?"

He rubbed her moist lip where he'd just nibbled. Drowning in his large leather coat, she breathed in his scent, then licked his calloused thumb. His growl sent shivers rushing over her and tingles shot down her spine, settling between her legs. A rush of lust swarmed the inside of the car. What she wanted to do was feel all that hard-packed muscle pressing against her. Getting to know Josie Balzon better might be the best move she'd made so far.

"I'll go with you, wolf man," she told him, then sucked his thumb into her mouth.

For a moment she thought his eyes would roll back into his head while a rumbling sounded low in his chest. A strange sensation crept over her. She liked thinking that she might have the power to control such an incredibly unique werewolf like Josie.

"But when I do, you're going to explain to me why it's so important that you and I are mated." She wanted to add that he didn't strike her as the kind of male who would mate with a bitch he didn't love. And no way could either of them honestly profess such a strong emotion after knowing each other for such a brief amount of time.

"I agree that this can be discussed further later." He took her hand, his thumb moist from her mouth, and kissed her knuckles before releasing her. "Stay in here where it's safe. I'll talk to these males."

"Josie." She grabbed his arm when he started to get out of his car. He looked at her, raising an eyebrow. "Don't hurt any of this pack."

The corner of his mouth twitched, his satisfaction showing when she didn't refer to them as her pack. "You have my word."

She shrugged out of his coat, but he stopped her. "You wear it," he told her. "I won't be cold."

Maura wouldn't be either, not while watching muscles strain and ripple under his flannel shirt as he moved to the front of his car and then slowly approached Steve and Willie. The two *lunewulf* males were so much shorter and smaller than Josie. Maura gave them credit for sniffing out Josie, glancing at her and holding their ground without turning tail and running. The two of them combined were no match for Josie.

As Josie walked toward them, Bob Abbey's truck pulled up. Her old pack leader squinted in her direction and then hopped out of his car, giving Josie his complete attention.

## Chapter Ten

Josie turned his attention away from the two males the second Bob Abbey, the *lunewulf* pack leader, pulled up and parked on the side of the road.

Josie recognized Bob Abbey instantly, having dealt with him a time or two since moving to the mountains. The slender male, with his crew cut and several noticeable scars on his face, moved with the typical smell of an aggressive pack leader.

"What the fuck are you doing in my pack?" he snarled, walking straight up to Josie and then stabbing his finger into Josie's chest. "And with one of my bitches too. This better be real damned good."

Josie focused on Bob Abbey's thoughts more than his words. It surprised him that Bob wished Josie would have hauled ass just a little bit faster so they wouldn't be having this conversation right now.

"You didn't refer to her as one of your mated bitches," Josie said, ignoring the finger stabbing him in the chest and keeping his voice quiet enough that the two males lingering by their cars would really have to strain to overhear him.

"And you aren't answering my question." Bob wasn't scared of Josie. If anything, he thought Josie smelled a bit on the cocky side and might need to be knocked down a bit so he would learn to show some respect. "You've got two seconds to make me believe there's a damn good reason why you're here on my streets with Maura. Otherwise, I'm personally hauling you out of here."

"You don't have to haul me. I'll go with you." Josie listened when Bob's thoughts came to a standstill as shock from Josie's words hit. One on one, without using the gift, Bob could possibly make him sweat. "The honorable thing to do is talk to you anyway. Do you want me to ride with you? Or follow you?"

Bob didn't think before acting. Fortunately, Josie half expected the pack leader to make a show of putting him in his place. Bob attacked with his fist, aiming straight for Josie's nose. Even ducking as quickly as he did, Bob still made contact, his knuckles brushing the side of Josie's head. It could have been a deadly blow.

Bob glared at him when his fist didn't connect where he'd planned. Maura jumped out of the car, her scent hitting him at the same moment that Bob looked past him.

"Don't hurt him!" Maura screamed and ran toward Josie.

He would have been flattered, if there was a chance in hell that Bob Abbey actually could hurt him.

"Little bitch," he growled when she reached his side and grabbed his arm. "What are you trying to do?"

*Bob doesn't even care what I want. Her pain over her pack's indifference stabbed at his heart. All this time I thought he was a friend. But no! I bet he knows Pete is dead. The only reason he's attacking you is so that he looks good in front of Steve and Willie.* For Maura, he would make this a quick exit. But also for her, he would take the time to speak with her pack leader before leaving.

Bob ignored Maura, and her hands wrapped around his arm. Seeing her snuggled into Josie's coat with his scent smothering her pissed Bob off more than hearing a Malta werewolf drove through his pack with one of their bitches.

*What the hell do these bitches see in these Malta males? She's fucking mated with the pompous jerk. Like that coat she's drowning in could hide his sex dripping out of her. He won't even deny killing Pete Wagner. I can't have these werewolves pushing us around like this.* His thoughts poured out of him with so much spiciness it was worse than if someone had spilled hot pepper all over the place.

"Your time is up." Bob glared at Josie. "Explain to me right now what the fuck is going on. And don't you dare leave out one little detail."

"Bob Abbey, pack leader of the *lunewulfs*, honor the traditions of all werewolves and I will offer every detail that brings us to this moment." Josie straightened as he spoke, clearing his thoughts so his scent wouldn't be readable. Keeping his facial expression in check also made it harder to sniff out his intentions.

Bob straightened as well, although at full height he was still several inches shorter than Josie. "If you wished to honor any tradition, I wouldn't have had to make members of my pack stop the two of you in the middle of the road."

"Honor will be kept intact here. Would you have me discuss this matter with you in the middle of your street?"

"By all means," Bob growled, waving his arm to the side of the road.

Josie lowered his head, a silent nod, which Bob interpreted as him showing submission. Like that would ever happen. Bob walked over to where he had parked his truck alongside the road and stepped onto the shoveled sidewalk. Josie knew this pack hadn't been here more than five years or so. Must be nice as fucking hell for Werewolf Affairs to fund their pack with enough money to have such nice roads and landscaping.

Josie walked around the front of Bob's truck, aware of the two other *lunewulf* males moving in on either side of him. Like any attack would occur with Maura clinging to his arm. Her nervousness aggravated him and he glanced down into her concerned blue eyes.

*He isn't going to let me leave with you.* She almost moved her lips when she thought her worries to him.

Josie squeezed her hand. "Everything will be okay. I promise you that." For a moment he wasn't able to hide the overwhelming surge of happiness that attacked him.

Maura was afraid that Bob would prevent her from being with Josie. She wanted him. No bitch had ever gotten under his skin so damned quickly. Once they were out of here, he would give her the time she needed to think. He would need that time too.

Soon he would figure out why he knew beyond any doubt that this bitch would be by his side—forever. And when he did, he would share his thoughts with her, even if it killed him. Maura deserved that.

"How long have you two been seeing each other?" Bob demanded, scowling at the intimate way Maura held on to him.

"The first time I met him was when I ran with Heidi." Maura straightened, giving Bob her full attention. "But I honored my mating, Bob. You know that I did. Not once did I ever cheat on Pete. And you and everyone else in this pack knew he was cheating on me so bad the stench was unbearable."

"You honored your mating?" Bob questioned. "Look at you two. You've mated with this Malta werewolf while the stench of your dead mate fills your den. I sure as hell haven't seen him in this pack before. Explain this to me."

"Maura speaks the truth. She was in our territory yesterday after her mate dumped her off on the side of the highway."

"What?" Bob hissed.

"She slept in a cave and I found her yesterday morning. Since then she's been with me. After speaking with Maura and confirming this is what she wants as well, I approach you now for your blessing with this mating."

"You've got to be kidding." Bob ran his hand over his closely trimmed hair and blew out a breath of exasperation. "Explain to me how Pete was killed in his den."

"His neck was broken." Josie figured that much was obvious.

Bob glared at him. *I should let her go and wash my hands of this mess.* "Do you admit that you killed a member of my pack?"

"I promised Maura widow status. She deserved that much after what she had been put through."

"The law does not lie in your paws!" Bob turned to see where the two males stood, watching and listening on either end of his truck. "The Wagner den has right to retribution. You speak of honor and tradition. Now you will uphold what is their right. You've killed in cold blood without a challenge, werewolf. They now have a right to draw first blood."

"Oh God," Maura sighed.

"I will stand before them."

Maura let go of his arm, turning to face him, looking more stunned than Bob. She swatted her hair from her face, her expression flushed with emotions. "Josie. No. Pete had three male littermates. They all live here. You can't."

Bob studied the intimate level of concern Maura showed for Josie. *There will be no out for the Malta werewolves on this one. If he refuses, he admittedly shows no honor. The Wagner den will rip him to shreds. Finally the Malta pack will be put in their place. And about time too. These males strolling in here and walking off with our bitches is going to stop.* His mislaid satisfaction didn't show in his concerned expression.

"I'll notify the Wagner den that you acknowledge killing their littermate." Bob nodded, rising up on his heels while fisting his hands against his hips. He looked very satisfied, thinking his troubles would soon be over. "Our laws and traditions state that the den has the right to draw first blood to satisfy the death of one of their own."

"We follow the same laws and traditions," Josie growled. It was only due to the male's rank that he didn't say a few other things that came to mind. Like the asshole got what was his for the many times he brutalized Maura. Where was her den? Did they have a right to first blood? And since she had no den, did that make her fair play as a punching bag?

"How can you talk so nonchalantly about something so bloody and violent?" Maura glared at him, then turned her back and frowned at Bob. "All three males have the right to first blood against Josie? What? Is he supposed to stand there with his tail between his legs and let them attack?"

"That is the law," Bob said, nodding.

"They'll kill him!"

"The laws of our kind have existed for hundreds and hundreds of years for good reason." Turning her until she faced him, Josie stared into her fiery blue eyes. "They work and we will continue to follow them."

"I don't believe this." She threw her hands up in the air and his oversized coat slid down her shoulders when she lowered her arms. Catching it before it slipped to the ground, she quickly wrapped it around her as she stared at him, willing him to hear her thoughts and reconsider what he was about to do. *Isn't there something you can do? Use your powers, damn it. Josie — don't leave me, please.*

"At least the Malta werewolf and I agree that our laws are effective." Bob still sounded quite satisfied with the direction all of this headed. His happiness mixed with her spicy outrage, creating an odd array of smells around them. "At midnight tonight, you will meet in our ceremony park. Maura knows how to get there."

Josie tilted his head, thinking the pack leader overlooked one issue in his excitement over first blood. "I intended to speak with you today," he began quietly, allowing Bob the moment to remember what it was he overlooked.

Bob looked at him, shifted his gaze quickly to Maura, then returned his attention back to Josie.

"And as I've mentioned already," Josie continued, "I want your blessing, for Maura's sake, for our mating."

Bob shook his head. "Go with your damned blessing. Just be at the ceremony park at midnight. You wanted Maura to have her widow status. Now you can give it to her personally."

Bob walked over to his truck and Josie took Maura's shoulder, guiding her to his car. He anticipated an escort to the edge of the *lunewulf* territory, and that was exactly what they got.

"Tell me you aren't going to spill blood like some righteous martyr? Absolutely none of that made any sense back there. And you really don't strike me as the type to play willing victim."

"I can't promise no blood will be spilled." They headed up the mountain, entering into Malta territory. His cell phone buzzed for the hundredth time. Without even bothering to check the number, he sent it to voicemail. He half expected a full army to be waiting for him, claws bared, when they got to his den. "But I'm pretty sure I won't die tonight."

"You're going to use your gift to make sure they can't hurt you?" She sounded hopeful.

"I use my gift just like you use your nose to breathe or your ears to hear." He sighed, trying to find a satisfactory way to explain how the gift worked for him. "It's always part of me. And it's always in use. Possibly the better question would be if I'm going to control the gift tonight."

Josie slowed when they reached the road leading up to his den. It was still daylight and there wasn't a cloud in the sky, which would keep it bright out longer. Maura would stand out, a *lunewulf* among Malta werewolves. One hot, sexy fucking *lunewulf*. Already, as they took the curves in the road at about five miles an hour, he sensed the pack talking about the bitch who was seen with him in Valle earlier. The whispered thoughts crept along with the breeze, seeping into his brain.

It wasn't always easy to distinguish whose thoughts he heard, especially when he didn't see anyone around. As they drove by, werewolves in their dens pondered everything from what they should have for dinner to whether they should take a run or stay home and try to get laid.

"Okay. Are you going to control your gift tonight?" She studied his face, her thoughts not even heading in the direction of trying to understand how he did what he did. "Do you know what's going to happen tonight?"

"You're something else. You know that?" He stroked the side of her chin, then ran her hair over his fingers. "Thank you for not asking me to explain the gift. It would be like trying to tell someone what a rose smells like when they have no sense of smell. And no. I don't know what is going to happen tonight."

Thoughts from his pack members grew stronger. He and Maura were the topic of discussion for several werewolves who stood outside one of the dens as they drove by. He listened to their thoughts and wished he could hear what they said.

"I'm sure you could predict what will happen." She pouted, making his dick hard. "They intend to make a fool of you. Bob wants to show our pack that Malta werewolves are idiots. Your standing in front of everyone letting those three bastards attack you will add proof to his argument."

"Traditionally, the draw of first blood allows the coward to save face after attacking without announcement, and it also gives the den opportunity to satisfy their revenge."

"Which is why it will make you out to be the fool."

"In this case, since your pack knows what kind of werewolf Pete Wagner was, it will show that the rest of his den are cowards. They didn't come seek me out. I stepped forward and agreed, through a mutual party, to allow them to draw first blood." Josie had a feeling that by tonight the *lunewulf* pack leader would see the error of his ways. It would be amusing to see how he would try to cover up his fuckup. "When we arrive at your ceremony park tonight, your pack will see that you are now free of the bondage of a bad mating. I hope a few of them notice that you're moving up in the world."

Maura shook her head. "You're the one who is something else."

She didn't buy his explanation. Her thoughts were so clear it was as if she spoke out loud. *I hate it that he's impossible to sniff out. And I know he's capable of expressing emotions. I've smelled his lust and his happiness after fucking. I've smelled his anger. Why won't he share what he's thinking with me?*

Her thoughts brought him pause.

She'd figured him out but didn't realize it. He saw what she didn't. His feelings were irrepressible when he was with her. Maura surfaced emotions inside him that were too strong to contain. Once again he studied her profile as he parked his car in front of the den. As he suspected, the welcoming party was here. Although party hardly described the hostile feelings leaping off his pack leader. Maura glanced over at him and pushed her long hair over her shoulder with slightly trembling fingers.

"Who all is here?" Maura tensed and straightened as she turned her attention to the males lingering outside his den.

Every muscle inside him hardened. The urge to run them off, protect his bitch and do whatever it took to calm the tension suddenly consuming her hit him harder than if one of them had pounded his face with a fist.

He kept his tone and emotions calm for her benefit. "Dimitri, our pack leader, is the one leaning against the truck. You've met him before. And you already know Nicolo. Neither one of them will give you any grief."

"They don't look very happy to see us." Maura seemed to disappear inside his leather coat.

Josie parked his car and took in the thoughts of both males who quit talking about him the second he pulled into his drive. He smiled at her, then took her hand and pulled her to his side as he opened his car door.

"They won't bite. You have my word."

"I'm not sure I'm in the mood for another pack leader," she groaned.

"This is the last one." He wasn't in the mood for another pack leader either. And he sure didn't feel like dealing with Dimitri's attitude. He let him know as much with a low growl as he approached the two males, holding Maura closely to his side. "Are you two lost?" he asked.

"Not funny." Dimitri smelled like he always did – angry. His thoughts were just as dark and depressing, except this time Josie was the cause of it. "When were you planning on discussing your visitor with me?"

Nicolo sniffed the air and then raised an eyebrow, giving Dimitri a side glance. "Does she smell like a visitor to you?"

"You get away with a hell of a lot, Josie. This isn't going to be one of them." Dimitri stepped away from the truck, crossing his arms and blocking the path to the den. "I don't even want to hear what has happened between you two. Take her back to her pack right now."

"That's not going to happen." Josie held Maura close and stepped around Dimitri and Nicolo so they could get inside.

"Josie! Yes, it is." The hardness in Dimitri's tone almost matched the coldness of his thoughts.

Josie looked down at Maura, who looked wide-eyed at all of them. He hated the smell of fear on her. She had to know he would never send her back.

"Go inside," he told her quietly, then brushed his knuckles over her jawbone. "Let me talk to these two alone for a minute."

Maura nodded, glancing quickly at Dimitri and Nicolo. He could kick Dimitri's ass right here and now for talking like that in front of her.

He waited until she was inside before unleashing his wrath on Dimitri.

"We've already dealt with our share of pack leaders today, Dimitri. Bless this mating or get the fuck out of my yard." Josie straightened, staring at the werewolf he used to wrestle with when they were pups.

"You've already told Bob Abbey about this?" Dimitri asked, dumbfounded.

"Got his blessing too."

"What?" Nicolo's jaw dropped. "I fought tooth and claw to get Heidi out of that pack. Someday you're going to have to tell me how you do it."

As usual, Nicolo's temperament was as laid back as Dimitri's was riled. It amazed the shit out of Josie that they came from the same den.

"I killed her mate," Josie told him.

Dimitri's thoughts exploded in his brain a fraction of a second before his fist came down on the roof of his truck. "What the fuck did you just say?" he screamed, then lunged at Josie. "You just sauntered into their pack and killed her mate?"

"I drove." Josie leapt to the side when Dimitri tried pounding his face. He ducked in order to avoid a punch that once he would have taken and returned with another. Josie lost interest in showing respect when Dimitri unleashed his temper on him.

"You've gone too far this time, Josie." Dimitri swung again, this time clipping the side of Josie's face. "All your life you've played this omnipotent game with every werewolf around you, simply because the gift runs so strong in your blood. Well, motherfucker, don't think I can't make your blood stop running."



Dimitri despised the gift. He blamed it for destroying his den, his life on Malta and the only happiness he believed he would ever experience. More than once since they arrived in the mountains, Josie caught Dimitri thinking that it was cruel, twisted fate that made him pack leader. He thrived on the opportunity to pick up the pieces of their broken pack and rebuild the reputation of Malta werewolves. But he blamed the gift for making his job such an uphill challenge. And he was jealous as hell of Josie and all others who possessed the gift when Dimitri didn't.

And it wasn't because their previous pack leader, Bruno Tangaree, refused to bestow the gift on Dimitri. Very few werewolves knew that Dimitri had tried to learn the gift. As a pup he went to his pack leader's home just like Josie did. Dimitri fought so hard to master what was taught and just couldn't figure out why it never worked for him.

If Josie didn't spend so much time with Dimitri and hear his thoughts almost daily, he might not have stumbled onto that deeply hidden truth. Dimitri would never openly admit it, and even now as he bulldozed into Josie, knocking both of them into the snow, Josie knew the attack was based more on jealousy than trying to prove a point.

He forced Dimitri's thoughts out of his head and focused on what his pack leader was doing to him at the moment. If he didn't, he would get the crap beat out of him.

Somewhere in the distance, Nicolo yelled at the two of them to quit acting like pups.

"You going to take the stress of your day out on me?" Josie asked, shoving Dimitri off him and jumping to his feet, ready for his next blow.

"Stay the fuck out of my head," Dimitri hissed.

"Then clear your thoughts long enough to hear what I'm saying to you." Josie shoved Dimitri and pent-up energy rushed to life inside him.

He lunged into Dimitri, ready to return the attack. Following his own suggestion to chill out didn't appeal to him at the moment. Dimitri attacked him and instinct screamed to life inside Josie, demanding he take down the werewolf who dared to physically assault him. Not to mention being attacked over something he believed was right pissed him off to where he saw red.

Josie grabbed Dimitri, clutching his jacket with his fists and shaking the crap out of him. "Her mate dumped her out on the highway just outside our territory. He threw her away." If he could shake him hard enough to rattle Dimitri's teeth, he would.

The two of them glared at each other, eye to eye, while Dimitri fought to keep what Josie just said out of his head.

*Goddamn it! He just pranced into that lunewulf pack and took that bitch because he wanted her. Now I'm going to have to defend Josie's actions to that fucking pack leader. And that little bitch he just shoved into his den — there's no way he's going to let her go.* Dimitri's thoughts were as clear as if he spoke aloud to Josie.

"You're right," Josie said, responding to his thoughts. "I'm not letting her go."

"Get the fuck out of my head." Dimitri brought his arms up and slapped Josie's hands away from him. "No matter what you hear me thinking, werewolf, that doesn't change the fact that I heard about this *lunewulf* bitch through the grapevine and not from you."

"Forgive me. Maura needed to deal with some matters in her den."

"Have you seriously only known her for a day?" Nicolo asked. Usually the werewolf stayed quiet, pondering everything he heard and taking his time forming conclusions.

Josie switched his attention to Nicolo, not ready for the question since he had all his attention on Dimitri's thoughts. "I met her when you two did, a few months ago. Yesterday morning was the next time I saw her."

"You mate with a bitch after knowing her for a fucking day?" Dimitri didn't buy it.

"She was kicked out of her den, of her pack. Her mate was a creep—you remember how beaten she looked the first time we saw her."

"Heidi told me that Maura often had bruises on her."

"So this is a mating of convenience?" Dimitri crossed his arms, staring hard at Josie. "You, who've fucked every available bitch who would lift her tail for you, suddenly decide to give up the life of a slut and take a female into your den because she's abused and neglected? How fucking kindhearted you suddenly smell."

"There's more to it than that." Josie ignored the negative thoughts Dimitri had about him.

All of it stemmed from Dimitri being so damned coldhearted that no bitch would touch his tail even with his title and rank. The one bitch who did sniff him out, Rosa, would never get through that brick wall Dimitri built around his heart. The male was dead inside. And Maura thought Josie was a pain in the ass when it came to sharing how he felt. Compared to Dimitri, Josie was a tidal wave of emotions.

"You're going to tell us that after one day you've fallen in love with this bitch?" Nicolo cocked his head, determining the answer to his question as he studied Josie.

"You loved Heidi after one day." Josie remembered being stunned when he'd first heard Nicolo's thoughts when the young *lunewulf* bitch who was now his mate chased him down and stole his heart.

"So you're saying you are," Nicolo prompted.

Josie stared at his den, reaching out with his mind to learn what Maura did at this moment. "Something has happened," he said slowly.

## Chapter Eleven

Maura stood inside the dark den and watched the three males disappear into the woods. Her heart still raced so hard after watching Josie and Dimitri go at it in the snow that it hurt. Then as if nothing had happened, the three of them left the den, heading into the woods together. Males were the same no matter what breed they were.

"Well, this is lovely." She turned, taking in the layout of the living room.

The furniture, the bearskin rug on the floor underneath her boots, the unfinished wooden walls surrounding her—all of it smelled like Josie. The only place where the aroma differed drifted from his bedroom. She took one step toward the short hallway and the opened door with his large bed just beyond it. Maura breathed in the thick, pungent smell of their sex and knew without looking that the blankets and sheets were twisted and unmade on his bed.

Was this her den now too?

"Shit, wolf man. What have we done?" There had been no discussion, no intimate moments building until the two of them proclaimed their love for each other. "Aren't you supposed to love someone you mate with?"

She pictured the intense way Josie looked at her when she challenged him in the car earlier. And then again when he asked her if he should talk to Bob about their mating. Both times she ached to know what went on in his mind. Those dark eyes of his and that determined, hard expression Josie probably mastered years before meeting her revealed so little about him.

There was a lot of like between them. Or was it lust—or both? Josie did something to her insides that no werewolf ever did to her before. In the short time that she'd been here with him, she'd picked up on a few of his characteristics. Some of them were more obvious than others. She noticed how his face changed around his eyes when he worked his way into a werewolf's mind. And she was aware of how blank his expression went when she demanded to know his thoughts. Like it would hurt him to open up to her.

Well, if it was so damned painful for him, why did he insist on their mating?

"It wasn't like this was my idea."

Heading over to the wood box next to his fireplace, Maura stacked logs, stuffed newspaper, then used the long lighter to start the fire. Watching the flames jump to life, take form and change colors, Maura relaxed on her haunches and let her thoughts continue to wander.

"Why do you want me, Josie?" She stared at his empty living room as if it would offer the answer.

Snow crunching outside grabbed her attention and she jumped up, moving silently to the window. Three bitches, one of them Heidi, stomped through drifting snow toward the den.

She hurried to open the door, still unsure if she should consider this her den or not.

"Thank you for having a fire," Heidi said the moment they finished kicking snow off their boots and stepped inside.

"No shit. I'm cold as hell in my flesh." A bitch she didn't know with thick, long black hair and a figure to die for rubbed her arms through her down coat. After a moment Maura remembered her from yesterday when Josie and others brought her here from the cave.

"Maura, you remember Moira from yesterday." Heidi quickly made introductions. "Moira is Dante Aldo's mate, and this is Rosa, her cousin through mating."

"Nice to meet you." The urge to submit to them warred with a sensation that she should play the role of bitch in this den. She let the latter sensation win out. Her longtime friend and these Malta bitches wouldn't see her as a female in a crisis, on the run and hiding out. She didn't want to see herself like that. "I just got the fire going—give me a second and we'll have coffee."

The three bitches left their coats in the living room and followed her into the kitchen where they got cozy around the table. Their relaxed moods helped Maura calm down and enjoy the role of hostess. Within minutes she had coffee brewing and managed to hunt down sugar and milk.

"We'll have to take you into town to stock up on amenities." Moira accepted her coffee and blew on it, looking up from her seat with soft black eyes.

Maura leaned against the counter, since there weren't enough chairs for all of them at the table, and watched the two Malta bitches. They weren't sniffing her out. If anything, they seemed less curious about her than she was them.

"Josie will take me into town. But thank you."

Heidi's laughter and the other two bitches' smiles confused Maura. It must have shown on her face. She must smell slightly aggravated since she didn't know why they were here. And now they all laughed like she just told a good joke.

"You're going to have to get used to the same thing I had to get used to." Heidi stood and moved in front of Maura, taking her hands and staring her into the eyes. "Tell me if I'm wrong but I get the feeling you're going to stay here. And well, if you do, Josie will run just like Nicolo does."

"Both of them run very close with our pack leader," Moira interrupted and Heidi turned, her cold hands still holding Maura's. Moira remained sitting and turned her attention to Rosa when she spoke. "Dimitri's anger makes him crazy. Nicolo and Josie keep him in line—sometimes."

"The three of them also have known each other most of their lives," Heidi added.

Moira didn't say anything but stared at Rosa, who returned the hard gaze. For a moment it seemed both bitches forgot anyone else was in the room. Maura glanced from one to the other, smelling strange emotions coming from both of them. Determination and even the faintest spicy aroma indicating anger suddenly tickled her nose.

It hit her suddenly what she was witnessing. She squeezed Heidi's hand. "They both have the gift?" Maura whispered.

"Pretty sure," Heidi said, also whispering.

Rosa leaned back, sighing. She broke her gaze away from Moira and looked up at Maura and Heidi apologetically. "We're being rude in your brand-new den." Rosa stood quickly, giving Moira a dirty look. "Moira seems to think she knows my own mind better than I do."

"It doesn't take the gift to know you're turned on by a werewolf who seems unapproachable to every female in this pack," Moira said very quietly, her teasing tone bordering on a challenge.

"If and when I decide to take a mate, I won't need your help doing it." Rosa tossed her long, thick black hair over her shoulder and turned her back on Moira, focusing on Maura. "We want you to know that we're here if you need us. When Josie takes off like he did just before we got here, you don't have to sit up here in this den and feel isolated from the pack. We're cool with you being here."

"Your pack leader doesn't share your opinion." Maura swore something glistened in Rosa's pretty eyes when she mentioned their pack leader. Maybe Moira meant Dimitri when she suggested Rosa was interested in a male that no other female could get close to. Dimitri definitely struck her as an unapproachable werewolf.

"He'll bless your mating. Don't worry." Rosa sounded so sure of herself.

"You've heard him discuss us?" Maura asked.

"No. But he'll do anything to keep Josie happy," Rosa told her. "Josie serves the pack more than any other werewolf with the gift and runs by Dimitri's side. Dimitri will give Josie whatever he wants to make him happy."

"That would make him an invaluable tool," Maura said quietly, imagining the advantage a pack leader would have if he knew the thoughts of any werewolf challenging him.

Just like Josie would have an incredible edge if challenged—he would know the thoughts and plans of the werewolves preparing to fight. She thought back to Josie talking to Bob and the challenge to draw first blood. Josie told her he didn't think he would die tonight. And he agreed to the meeting so easily, without hesitating. Maybe Josie's gift gave him more of an edge than she thought. Not only could he manipulate the challenge, he would know the thoughts and plans of the Wagner den before each of them attacked him.

"Maura?" Moira asked quietly.

Pulled out of her thoughts, she looked up quickly.

"Josie has shared with you what he can do with his gift, right?"

"Yes. It's going to take some getting used to." She hoped her smile made light of how unnerving his gift had been when he used it on her.

"Rosa and I can do pretty much what Josie can do," Moira said, straightening in her chair and crossing her arms. "I'm telling you this because your thoughts just leaned toward something that startled the shit out of me."

"Me too," Rosa added. She still faced Maura but now her dark eyes lined with silver. "Josie's a tough werewolf to understand, but if he's done something that has you scared, maybe we can help."

Maura stared from Moira to Rosa, remembering what Josie told her when he explained the gift to her. He heard the thoughts that were in her mind at the moment, but that didn't mean he knew everything she knew. She didn't dare replay in her mind what she had just thought about. Rosa and Maura didn't completely understand what had just been in her mind, but they had picked up on something from her about Josie that neither one of them liked. The last thing she needed was the pack jumping Josie's tail because a couple bitches in his pack overheard her thoughts while visiting with her in his den and welcoming her to the Malta pack.

"Would one of you mind telling me what's going on?" Heidi demanded, putting her hands on her hips and glaring at Rosa and Moira, but then giving Maura her attention. "You have to get used to these two, and if they start making no sense, just howl at them until they remember to include you. Now why are you scared of Josie?"

"I'm not scared of him. Not at all." Maura squeezed her friend's arm, reassuring her until Heidi's worried scent faded. "And I'm not going to share his personal business with you. None of you would talk about your mate behind his back."

"Okay. Okay." Rosa held her hands out, a feeble attempt at surrendering, although her curiosity heightened her scent enough to keep the silver lining around her eyes. "But you've got to tell us at least why the right to draw first blood just popped into your mind."

"A challenge to draw first blood is only called for when a werewolf kills another werewolf without announcing it first," Moira offered, quoting traditions all of them already knew.

"Has Josie killed someone?" Heidi asked, but then frowned and slowly brought her hand to her mouth, the ripe smell of her shock filling the room quickly. "I wondered how you could have mated with him, even though I smelled his scent so deeply on you. I know you like a littermate and you would never be with another werewolf if you were mated. But if you were a widow..."

"Oh shit." Moira jumped to her feet. "Josie killed your mate."

"And he didn't announce it, did he?" Rosa snapped her fingers, excited that she'd just figured it out.

"Stop it." Maura didn't mean to yell as loudly as she did, but her heart suddenly beat so hard she could hardly catch her breath. "Josie will know if all of you know. Maybe you should leave before he gets here."

"Maura. Damn it." Heidi pulled Maura into her arms. "You two have to stop. She's going to panic."

"I'm fine," Maura lied.

"Josie would never hit you," Rosa offered.

Maura closed her eyes, fighting the sudden sting that threatened to make her cry. There was no way these bitches would see how damaged her mating to Pete left her. Josie wouldn't hurt her. She believed that, even after knowing him just for a day. There were certain qualities that ran too strong inside him. His powerful belief in upholding traditions and his honor wouldn't allow him to strike her the way Pete had.

"I think they're all coming." Moira made the announcement and stood, heading to the doorway.

Maura let go of Heidi's hands, patting her friend and smiling reassuringly, then stepped past Moira. She heard the males before she reached the front door. As she reached for the doorknob, the door opened toward her, cold air rushing around her filled with the incredibly dominating scent of Josie.

Even though the other males filled the doorway and then the small living area as they all entered and stomped snow from their boots, all she noticed was Josie.

The spicy smell of his anger couldn't be ignored.

"Are you two done devouring her mind and gaining every bit of information you can get out of her?" he bellowed, glaring at Moira and Rosa.

"We came over here to welcome her to the pack and you damn well know that," Moira snapped, standing up to him in spite of the fact that Josie and the other males stood a good six inches taller than any of the females in the room.

"Seems odd you would do that when she isn't part of this pack," Dimitri said coldly.

Josie glared at him then pushed into Maura, wrapping his arms around her and forcing her to step backward and out of the crowd. Hard muscle and his wonderful scent mixed with leather and the outdoors made her heart race. Blood pumped so hard in her veins that the change cried out to come forth. She ached to allow her senses to heighten and to take on the large male who held her so close and protectively. She gulped in a breath of air that filled her lungs with his smell while fighting to prevent her craving from growing too much. Although maybe filling the living room with the smell of lust would give the males and bitches around them clue enough to leave.

"Why do you lie when you know damned good and well that you're going to approve their mating?" Rosa walked to Dimitri, stabbing her finger into his chest.

Amusement washed over the room. Even Josie tucked Maura next to him, keeping one arm around her while turning to watch Rosa take on his pack leader. Maura

remembered Moira suggesting that Rosa would challenge a male who was unapproachable.

"Bitch," Dimitri growled, "you're out of line. I suggest you quit sniffing where your nose doesn't belong or I swear I'll find a mate for you who can keep you in line."

"I doubt you could find one," Rosa growled, then turned from her pack leader, intentionally ignoring him and looking at Maura.

For a moment it looked like Dimitri might pick her up and throw her out of the den.

"We really did come over here to welcome you to our pack." Rosa's tone softened so much it was impossible not to believe her. "Your mate can explain to you how hard it is not to hear the thoughts of anyone who is in the same room with you. There's no way you can blame us for being concerned about what we discovered."

Maura nodded, knowing if she said anything, it would jeopardize Josie, especially if he didn't want his pack leader knowing. Apparently living with Josie and this pack would mean avoiding anyone who would sniff out her thoughts or accept that her mate wouldn't share his life with her so others wouldn't be able to discover what he chose to do or not do.

"I won't forbid you from seeing these bitches, if you wish to see them again," Josie said, looking down at her with smoldering, dark eyes. "Nor will I ever hide my actions from you. I've done nothing that I'm ashamed of."

"What the hell have you done?" Dimitri asked. "Other than bringing her to your den and letting it slip your mind that you should consult with your pack leader before taking a mate."

Moira stared at Josie, a look that bothered Maura, even though she knew the bitch was mated. And Moira didn't look happy – far from it. Her eyes widened the longer she studied him until Maura looked up at Josie. He broke eye contact with Moira, his features softening quickly when he looked at her.

"Josie, you want to enlighten us as to what these bitches are talking about?" Nicolo prodded, reaching his hand to Heidi, who quickly moved around everyone until she was in his arms. "Kind of sucks being out in the cold here."

"These bitches need tighter leashes on them," Josie muttered.

"That can be arranged." Dimitri scowled at Rosa, who raised a perfectly sculpted eyebrow at him while growling under her breath.

"You have a right to know though, so I will tell you. Tonight at midnight I will enter the *lunewulf* pack with Maura. I've accepted the challenge from the Wagner den to draw first blood."

"Right to draw first blood?" Dimitri whispered, sounding like he didn't believe Josie.

"Yup. The right to draw first blood."



"That's only howled for when a werewolf kills another werewolf without announcing it first." Dimitri gave Josie a hard look, then turned his attention to Maura. "Where is your *lunewulf* mate?" He already knew, but he wanted the whole story.

"Before you got your phone call and the three of us left for the other side of the mountain, I told you there was more to the story than you originally smelled." Josie grabbed Dimitri's attention.

"You said you would explain further after we finished dealing with the Miccatto den. Their car is pulled out of the snow. We're back at your den. Time to fill me in on the details that are stinking up your den." Dimitri glanced at Rosa, who looked like she never stunk up anything.

"Since these bitches will speculate on the truth if they don't hear all the details, I will tell all of you what Maura rightfully didn't elaborate on."

The den grew incredibly quiet while all of his packmates focused on Josie. Hardly any emotions smelled up the air. Every one of them waited with bated breath, their strained expressions clue enough that they doubted the details would be pretty.

"Maura had the right to widow status after what her mate did to her, so I helped her gain that status. Earlier today we entered her pack so she could get some of her things from her den. We ran into her pack leader, who by the way gave his blessing on the mating, but also said the den of her dead mate had the right to draw first blood since I didn't publicly challenge him before snapping his neck." Josie shrugged as if it were no big deal. "So I agreed."

"I don't fucking believe it," Dimitri hissed.

"You're going to prance into that *lunewulf* pack and send those males flying when they try to attack you." Rosa's accusation flooded the air with a ripe, angry smell. "You won't have any problem humiliating them, but they'll hate us even more because of it."

Dimitri held up his hand and Rosa snapped her mouth shut. He took a step closer until he stood right in front of Josie. "What exactly do you plan on doing at midnight?"

"I'll honor the tradition. But they won't hurt me. You have my word."

"I'm not worried about your word." Dimitri's calm, quiet tone was unnerving.

Josie's expression didn't falter. Not one muscle twitched in his face. Somehow that made him look even more dangerous. "In no way would I ever disgrace Malta werewolves. This challenge tonight is about honor and I will meet them and fight on their terms."

"You are fighting for her." Dimitri stuck his thumb in Maura's direction.

Josie didn't say anything, just stood staring at Dimitri. His silence made Maura's heart pound a bit harder. No werewolf had ever accepted a challenge for her. But this was the right to draw first blood, not a challenge for a mate. If Josie planned to fight for her, he would have challenged Pete. Her heart constricted so painfully it stole her breath. She looked down, staring at her hands and trying to calm her heart so her emotions wouldn't smell.

Apparently Josie's silence was answer enough for Dimitri. "I'll be here before midnight," he announced, then turned toward the door. "Do you bitches need an escort home?"

"I think we can find the way," Rosa told him, although her scent ripened noticeably when she moved closer to him, standing inches from his face and staring up at him before pushing past him to the door.

Josie stiffened, the muscles in his arm hardening around Maura, but he didn't dispute Dimitri's comment about joining them later. He held her, not saying anything as his pack members slowly piled out of his den. When the door closed behind Nicolo, who glanced over his shoulder and stared at Josie briefly before pulling the door until the lock clicked into place, Josie continued standing there, not moving.

"I don't think Bob expects your pack to show up with you." She tried moving out of his arms.

His grip tightened. "The evening should prove interesting."

"So predicting the future isn't part of your gift?"

"I can predict it as well as you can." He dragged his fingers through her hair, turning her so her breasts pressed against his hard chest. "You flatter me being worried for my safety tonight."

"You're taking on three males." In spite of the large werewolf pressing against her, she managed to focus on the determined glint in Josie's eyes. "I know we're a smaller breed, but don't underestimate us too much."

His cock throbbed to life between them and her nipples puckered painfully while her breasts swelled against his rock-hard chest.

"I've fought under worse odds before."

She nodded, more than aware of the growing smell of lust between them. Damn her body for aching to fuck him when her mind desperately needed answers. "Why fight these odds tonight?"

"For your honor." He lowered his mouth to hers and tangled his fingers in her hair so that she couldn't move her face away from his. "I pray that we seldom fight with each other, but I will always fight for you."

When his teeth scraped over her upper lip and then bit her just enough to ignite the fire already simmering deep in her womb, she lost the battle to keep her head clear. He didn't fight for her honor, but his own. Telling him that proved impossible when he made a feast out of her mouth, then moved to her neck, licking and nibbling at her flesh until she swore she'd explode in his arms.

"I don't think that's the reason." Her mind fogged over with lust. Josie's ability to take command of her body would make her insane. Her teeth poked against the inside of her mouth when she licked her lips. "Why fight for my honor in a pack that I might never see again?"

"Might?" he growled. He raised his head, leaving her neck damp where he'd just had his mouth. "My sweet little bitch, they are our neighboring pack. And I will have every *lunewulf* see that you have honor and dignity. That is your right."

"And it would make you look good too." Staring into his intense eyes, black with streaks of silver, gave her a drowning sensation. "I think you're fighting tonight for your honor. This has little to do with me at this point."

"All of this has to do with you." He let go of her hair but then slid his hands up her sides, gripping under her arms then lifting her until they stared eye to eye. "Everything that is happening is all about you."

"Don't die for me." She felt the hard wall press against her back. He wouldn't leave her hanging like he did last time. Quickly she wrapped her legs around his waist.

"Don't worry about that. But I would definitely kill for you." There was a different level of heat when he kissed her mouth this time. He took his time, tasting her, nipping with the tip of his teeth and then running his tongue along the inside of her mouth when she opened for him.

Maura enjoyed the smooth, solid swell of muscles in Josie's shoulders. He twitched under her touch. And when he moved his hands, running his fingers down her sides and then underneath her sweater, she prayed he'd undress and enjoy every inch of her. He pulled on her sweater and she arched into him. Josie exposed her breasts, growling his approval and then burying his face between them.

She wrapped her arms around his neck while straddling his waist with her legs. Holding on to all that corded, stretched muscle while he feasted on her breasts pulled her into him. It was a sensation she had never experienced before. As he scraped her puckered nipples with his slightly extended teeth, pins and needles stung her insides. What he did to her physically made it damned hard to concentrate on what they were talking about.

Something told her that was exactly what he wanted to happen.

"I want you in my bed," Josie told her, his hot breath washing over her swollen and heavy breasts.

She held on to him tightly as he moved from the living room into his bedroom. Her arms and legs were still wrapped around him when he went down on his bed, almost crushing her as her back pressed into his firm mattress.

"Get off me, wolf man." She almost laughed when a grumbling sound vibrated inside his body.

Josie left her on the bed, straightening and staring down at her with almost silver eyes while he tugged off his shirt. His pants went next. He never quit looking at her, as if he gave no thought to undressing because he was mesmerized by her.

Her mouth went dry as she stared at his perfectly sculpted body. It was unusual for a werewolf his age, a male full grown, to have so few scars. But his dark skin was smooth under black, tight curls of coarse hair that covered his chest, arms and legs.

Her eyes adjusted to the dark quickly as she stared up at Josie. He looked down at her, completely naked, and then slowly started stroking his cock. Her insides tightened as a quickening sensation washed over her womb while she stared, mesmerized at how his long fingers pressed and then pulled his long shaft. With each stroke his cock swelled, lengthened and thickened until it thrust out before him, hard, eager and looking very ready to fuck her.

"Your clothes need to be off you." His voice was gravelly, sexy-sounding, which made her eager to comply.

But as she shifted to grab her sweater, which was already bundled up under her armpits, it rose up her body as if hands pulled it from her.

"What the..." She lifted her arms and the sweater momentarily covered her face. She grabbed it, the instinct that she needed to protect herself when suddenly unable to see kicking in.

"Don't panic." His deep baritone sent chills rushing over her flesh.

The sweater was suddenly over her head and then flew to the side of the bed, as if it had just been tossed.

"A bit of a warning next time, if you please."

"Okay. Your shoes." He continued stroking his cock while the laces on her boots loosened and then she felt them being pulled from her feet. "And now your pants."

It was like determined hands gripped her pants, undoing them and then tugging them down her hips. Startled, she hurried to her knees, only to fall forward when the material continued its journey down her legs.

"Josie!" Her hands slapped his bedspread and then her legs stretched out behind her. The jeans slipped down her legs past her ankles, twisting around her feet momentarily before falling off her completely.

Maura twisted on the bed, scrambling to her knees and facing Josie, both of them completely naked. "I thought all you could do was move things and hear other werewolves' thoughts."

"I simply moved your clothes off your body." He continued rubbing his fingers up and down the length of his shaft and a low rumble rose from deep inside him. "You look much better this way."

"And is it always about what you want?"

He continued moving his fingers rhythmically against his shaft, distracting the hell out of her. But it was a point she needed to make. Watching him stroke his cock built an intense pressure inside her pussy, but Josie would hear how it must be. Hearing her thoughts wouldn't help him understand. She needed to voice the terms of their relationship or there wouldn't be any relationship.

Josie stopped stroking, keeping his fingertips touching the swollen, smooth, round tip of his cock. "What I want is quite often what those around me wish for too," he said,

his voice no more than a soft growl. "I know you don't pant on your knees for any other werewolf."

"That's not what I meant."

"You don't want to fuck me?"

Maura shook her head and thick strands of blonde hair fell over her face. She brushed them out of the way, not wanting anything distracting her view of him. "I don't want you to fight tonight. I couldn't care less if you allowed Pete's den the right to draw first blood."

"If I don't fight, the *lunewulfs* will view me as a coward. Is that what you want?"

"I just don't want you to get hurt – or worse. You know as well as I do that allowing each of those mutts to strike once won't hurt you. But if you return the attack and the whole den fights you..." She sucked in a breath, searching for courage to put her thoughts accurately into words. "Something has started between us. We mated because it was the honorable thing to do, but this isn't a relationship." She waved her hand between them. "We need to let it grow and we need time to learn what each of us is about. Drawing first blood could steal that away from us."

Josie climbed onto the bed, his look one of a deadly predator. He devoured her with his eyes that glowed dark with hints of silver. "Do you really think they can hurt me?" he whispered.

"You're so sure no one can hurt you," she whispered back, knowing how dangerous it could be to challenge the confidence of such an extreme alpha male. "It could make you too confident."

His strong hand and long fingers wrapped around the side of her neck and pulled her to him. "I don't think any bitch has worried about me like you do," he growled into her neck and then scraped his teeth over her collarbone.

Maura hummed as need ignited inside her. Her nipples puckered painfully and her breasts swelled. The throbbing ache spread, growing until her pussy was drenched and her sweet, pungent smell filled the room.

There was an advantage to him knowing her mind the moment she did. Josie knew what part of her body needed him the most. He moved to her breasts, biting at each nipple then taking his time sucking on each one until she knew she'd explode.

Digging her fingernails into his shoulders, her legs trembled although she was on her knees. Letting her head fall back, she guessed a werewolf with the gift of knowing what people thought would give him an incredible sense of security. Especially over time as he mastered his abilities and grew used to hearing others and learning how to use the knowledge in their minds.

When he wrapped his arms around her and lifted her slightly, adjusting both of them so she lay underneath him, she took advantage and reached between them, wrapping her fingers around his thick, long cock.

"Little bitch," he growled.

She loved that sound. "Yes?" she whispered, a small amount of power flooding her insides when his expression hardened and his lashes fluttered over his glazed eyes.

"Don't stop." His words were forced, spoken through a tight jaw.

She moved her fingers slowly, caressing and stroking as he had when he made himself harder. No matter the control she had at the moment, she knew it was in her hands simply because he gave it to her. She had never witnessed strength and determination run so thickly in a werewolf's veins. Josie was all that and so much more. A mystery, yet oddly simple.

"I wasn't planning on stopping." She relaxed underneath him.

Maura spread her legs, allowing for his thick, muscular body to stretch over her. He held himself up just enough for her to look down between them and see his massive chest and muscles strain throughout his body.

God. What a fucking view. Pressure grew inside her as her pussy swelled and grew wetter. She reached between them, working his cock with both her hands and switching her gaze from traveling over his body to his face.

He focused on his headboard, not looking down at her. She stared at the veins protruding in his neck, the way his firm jawline accentuated how hard he focused on what she was doing. But more than that, she wondered if she had his entire attention. Somehow, she thought she might.

*Are you thinking about anything else, wolf man?*

If he heard her question in her mind, he showed no sign. His body remained hard, his eyes almost closed, and she swore if he could purr, he would be doing it right now.

Unfortunately, she could only handle stroking that incredibly hard cock of his for so long before she had to put it to better use. The sensations screaming inside her own body grew too intense to ignore any longer.

Possibly knowing she could push him so far that he didn't dwell on her thoughts put her over the edge too. She almost came watching his expression as she stroked his hard cock. He looked so...content.

Bringing her legs up, she pushed his cock down until it pressed against her soaked entrance. He was thick and moist against her fingers, and bringing them together, almost uniting them, filled the room with the smell of lust so thick it intoxicated her.

"Wait," he growled, not moving an inch.

"What?" He wasn't as far gone and at her mercy as she'd guessed. She was lightheaded with anticipation.

"You wish for all of my attention, to control me. Then that is how it will be." He lowered his head, piercing straight to her heart with the most beautiful deep black eyes. They glowed, sparked with streaks of silver. "Mount me, little bitch. Climb on top and control your werewolf. I have no problem giving you that."

His teeth pressed against his lips, stretching them slightly, making his jaw appear wider. With his dark skin and black hair flowing wildly around his face, he looked so

dangerous, so incredibly powerful and at the top of the food chain—and knowing it. She got so hot inside when he leaned back, offering her an even better view of his hard, swollen cock.

Her mouth was dry and she shook from the amount of need attacking her. “Fine,” she managed, her voice cracking. She licked her lips. “Lie down. Let me show you exactly what I’m made of. I don’t need to hear your thoughts the moment you think them to be able to know what is in your head.”

It was written all over his face, obvious when his muscles twitched as he sprawled over the top of his bed. His long body stretched from headboard to base. She loved his dark skin, which at the moment was covered with a smooth sheen from sweat that smelled so pungent and was mixed with his rich, lustful scent.

“I believe you.” He reached for her, and when his fingers touched her shoulders and then moved down her arms, tingles spread over her flesh. Just his touch made her insides scream with the need to come. “Gain your pleasure, little bitch. I can smell how desperately you crave it.”

There wasn’t any arguing that point. She knelt next to him, then raised her leg, almost loving the pain in her inner thigh when she stretched over him. She pressed her foot into the comforter on the other side of him. She wouldn’t easily kneel over him and be able to ride him. It was easier to do on one knee, bracing herself with her other foot. When she pressed her palms on his chest, his heartbeat thudded through her, adding to the need already coursing inside her.

Then she sank down, lowering herself so that his cock slowly filled her, moving deeper and deeper into her burning hot, soaked pussy.

“Damn. Sweet bitch!” Josie grabbed her breasts, twisting and tugging and driving her nuts.

She started a slow journey, feeling the incredible pressure spread inside her. Heat soared throughout her. His thick cock stroked her pussy walls, appeasing her intense itch and creating even more need every time he filled her. With each determined thrust, Josie brought her closer to the edge. But she wasn’t ready for it to end.

Maura moved quickly, keeping him inside her but switching from her knee and pressing both feet into the bed on either side of him. Then pressing her hands against his chest, she moved up and down. Letting her hair fall over her face, brush over the dark curls on his body, she watched it tangle with blurred vision. The view stole her breath, but she continued riding him, focusing on the strain in her legs to keep her from exploding too soon.

Their scents grew, built and filled the room as she picked up the pace. His slow growl matched the unbitchlike grunts she exhaled. He swelled, almost splitting her in two. A low growl formed somewhere in his chest, turning into a roar when he came deep inside her. The intense hardness in his expression matched the stiffening of his body. Maura felt his cock twitch inside her, hitting that special spot just right with his final thrust and making her come so hard she almost passed out.

"Damn, Maura," Josie grumbled, wrapping his arms around her when she collapsed on his chest. "I think you can control me anytime you wish."

She barely managed the energy to laugh. And she would say something smart in just a moment. Lying on his warm body, melting over him as her body sagged, she would put him in his place just as soon as she remembered how to breathe.



## Chapter Twelve

Josie turned and stared at the dark woods when branches crackled.

"What the fuck?" Dimitri's anger filled the air around them instantly as he sniffed the air and then growled at the darkness. "Nicolo. What the hell is your mate doing here?"

"Damned good question." Nicolo stepped out in front of Josie and Dimitri. "Heidi," he growled, putting his hands on his hips.

"We're going with you." Heidi marched right up to her mate.

"And you're not stopping us." Rosa's scent wasn't as readable as Heidi's, but her thoughts were loud and clear.

She refused to meet Josie's gaze, instead giving her attention to Dimitri and Nicolo. It bugged the shit out of her that Josie read her so easily, but that was too damned bad.

"Like hell I'm not stopping you. You both better turn tail and run back to the pack before you don't have a pack to run to." Dimitri stepped forward but Nicolo blocked him.

"Heidi. You know you can't go to the *lunewulf* pack. They have shunned you. Not to mention I won't have my mate being part of this." Nicolo ran his hand down the side of her face. His love for his mate actually drowned the spicy aroma that always surrounded Dimitri.

Heidi stared up at her mate, not speaking but begging with her eyes. Her thoughts were easily picked up over the two males'. She didn't want to miss out on the excitement and would love to prance into the pack who shunned her with her Malta werewolf by her side. Her courage and love for adventure seemed to be a strong *lunewulf* trait.

Maura opened the door to his den and Josie turned his back on the others, hurrying to her side before she could step outside.

"Why are they here?" she asked quietly. "If they're going with you, then so am I." *I have half a mind to follow you once you leave anyway*, she challenged, not giving a damn that he bristled at her thoughts. "You're fighting for me. It's my right to be able to watch. Even Bob said that I should show you where the ceremony park is."

"I am offering the right for first blood." There was no reasoning with her on this one. "Bob doesn't have any say over what you do anymore. And trust me, little bitch, I'll know how to find the ceremony park."

No werewolf understood the frustration of hearing a female's mind but not being able to follow a lick of reasoning going on inside. He smelled her frustration, her pain and her confusion over being left out. If they had left as soon as they walked out of his

den and the two bitches arriving hadn't detained them, he might not have heard her impulsive decision to threaten to follow him.

"And there would be no call to draw first blood if you hadn't killed my mate." Her lips puckered and her blue eyes sparkled in the night. She was fucking beautiful.

"We've been through all this."

"I've made up my mind. Leave me here and I'll follow you."

Rosa marched over to Josie. "And we'll help her."

"No one is helping anyone," Dimitri bellowed. "You bitches are staying here, and that's final."

"Say what you want, wolf man. What are you going to do if I disobey? Spank me?" Rosa's tempting challenge almost made smoke puff from Dimitri's ears.

He growled and reached for her neck.

Rosa was quick. She grabbed Josie's arm, actually laughing inside. Why the bitch enjoyed tempting Dimitri's short temper was beyond him. She found Dimitri attractive, and her vivid thoughts of fucking him were damned annoying, especially when the bitch knew Josie heard every detail. The least she could do was keep her morbid fantasies to herself when she was around him.

"Maura will be safe with me while you fight, Josie. You know that," Rosa said, speaking to him as if all the others weren't closing in on them.

"You aren't going to use the gift on the *lunewulf* pack." Dimitri reached around Josie and dragged Rosa backward.

"If they try to hurt us you're damned straight I'll defend us." Rosa relaxed and Dimitri quit tugging.

In fact, he let go of her like she'd burned him. "They won't hurt you because you aren't going."

"Dimitri." Rosa's tone turned soft. God, it was disgusting how terribly she ached to calm his wrath. "Josie honors Malta werewolves by standing up and offering the right to draw first blood. We'll all go and present a relaxed and peaceful air. No anger. You can't let them smell it on you."

"Are you trying to tell me how to behave?" he growled.

"I'm sure I don't have to."

"Uh-huh."

Josie glanced at Nicolo, who was stunned as he stared at his littermate. No bitch, or male for that matter, ever succeeded in getting to the soft side of Dimitri. In fact, Josie would swear Dimitri didn't have a soft side. Every inch of his insides flooded with bitterness and anger. His past haunted him daily. The only thing that made him a good pack leader was his drive and craving to see to it that Malta werewolves would overcome the past that drove him nuts every minute of his waking day.

"Heidi knows the *lunewulf* pack. Maura can protect both of them. Let them go. But only if the three of them agree to stay with both of you at all times." Josie met Nicolò's worried gaze, then turned his attention to Dimitri. "If we take off without them, they'll simply follow us. And we need to get going."

"Fine." Dimitri slapped his hand against his thigh, then turned his back on Rosa.

*Thanks, Josie.* Rosa at least had enough sense to thank him with her mind and not piss Dimitri off even further by voicing her gratitude.

A cold wind attacked his sweaty flesh when Josie let the change take over and resumed his human form after running to the *lunewulf* pack. Maura shivered next to him and he helped untie her clothes from around her damp, slender neck before untangling his own clothes.

"It's going to snow again," Nicolò offered, his teeth chattering as he slipped into his jeans.

"Thanks for the forecast." Dimitri sniffed the air as he dressed then moved closer to Josie. "Where is this park we're supposed to go to?"

"Just a couple blocks up the street," Maura and Heidi said at the same time.

Their small group worked to get their clothes on but Josie didn't pay attention to any of them but Maura. Werewolves almost always ran in groups and seeing bitches naked was something he'd lived with all his life. Heidi and Rosa meant nothing to him. All that mattered was making sure Maura didn't suffer any more than she already had.

Josie dressed quickly and then wrapped his arms around Maura, knowing how terrified she was to walk the streets of the pack she'd lived in for the past few years. Her mate had thrown her away and her pack ignored her pleas for help. She straightened, looking up at him with those beautiful blue eyes.

"Promise me you won't die," she whispered.

"I promise." He kept his tone serious for her. Telling her there was no way those piss-ass *lunewulf* males could hurt him wouldn't help her right now. She didn't understand the gift.

Maura walked quickly by his side, the rest of them alongside them as they moved down the middle of the shoveled street. Even though there was no one visible, Josie smelled the apprehension in the cold night air. He heard their worry, their eagerness to watch a good fight and their excitement to see a Malta werewolf go down.

"You can smell their fucking bloodlust." Dimitri didn't like that he couldn't see any of the *lunewulfs*. His thoughts didn't match his words though, as usual. "They're cowards not to come out and greet their neighboring pack."

"More than likely everyone is already at the park," Maura told him, boldly addressing the pack leader who had just dogged her breed.

Josie hugged her closer to him, proud of his spunky bitch. Dimitri didn't want her in his pack and thought little of her kind. Yet she spoke calmly, offering the obvious

information to him. Even in her thoughts she didn't belittle him. If he could keep this bitch by his side, life would definitely be a better place. He met Dimitri's scowl, making sure the werewolf saw Josie's satisfied expression. Dimitri looked away first.

"There are a hell of a lot of *lunewulfs* in the park ahead of us." Rosa pointed down the street. She probably heard the hundreds of thoughts blurring together just like he did. Being in a crowd could be damned annoying for that reason. "Just stay focused, Josie," she said, responding out loud to his thoughts. "Most of them don't care if that den gets the crap beat out of them."

"That wouldn't surprise me," Maura added.

"It's amazing," Heidi said. "The Wagner den howled so loudly when they helped all the other dens or did any good deed for the pack. I guess we're no better than any other pack. Bring it down to a good fight and all anyone wants to see is a bloodbath."

"It's in our nature," Nicolo admitted.

The icy cold breeze brought the rich scent of their recent lovemaking to Josie's nostrils. It made him burst with pride that Maura carried his scent with her head held high. They'd reached the park and *lunewulfs* stared curiously at the small group. Their reactions were mixed, but for the most part, the males and bitches staring at them equally despised and admired Heidi and Maura for walking among the dark Malta werewolves.

"Stand to the side." Their pack leader, Bob Abbey, yelled at his pack.

Quickly the *lunewulfs* parted like a sea responding to some higher power.

"I can't believe you would show your tail in this pack," a small bitch with a pup in her arms snarled at Heidi, and then glared at Maura.

"You can't acknowledge her—she's shunned." A *lunewulf* male grabbed the mouthy bitch and pulled her away from them.

Heidi held her head high, ignoring the comments. Nicolo wrapped his arms around her, keeping her very close and growling at the *lunewulfs* until they backed up farther. Dimitri acted like he didn't hear any of it. His attention remained on the pack leader as he walked into the middle of the group.

"You're here to support your packmate?" Bob asked Dimitri.

"You would do the same," Dimitri said, surprisingly not smelling outraged for a change. "Josie Balzon honors the Wagner den by offering the right to draw first blood. We shall witness his honor."

Bob nodded, then said something quietly to a stout *lunewulf* male standing next to him. The pack leader's thoughts were a mixture of emotions. He seemed to know he'd made a bad call with Maura. Somehow confirmation had reached him that Pete had dumped her outside their pack and that pissed him off. What surprised Josie, as he fought to hear the pack leader's thoughts and drown out everyone else around him, was that Bob respected him for showing up and for standing up for Maura. Apparently Bob liked Maura. Bob didn't like the idea of her being with a Malta werewolf though.

"Your pack members will stay over to the side, Balzon," Bob said, staring him in the eye. "There are three members of the Wagner den who seek first blood. You will give them the right to draw first blood?"

"I will." Josie looked away from Bob first, feeling Maura's small hands grip his arm as she clung to him. Showing softness at the moment wasn't appropriate, as much as he knew she craved seeing something like that from him. He kept his voice low and as calm as he could to reassure her. "Dimitri and Nicolo will stand by you. Go with them now."

Maura trembled, fear and panic threatening to consume her. "Remember your promise, wolf man."

He nodded once, then stroked her smooth, long hair. Ignoring the outrage from the pack around him that a *lunewulf* bitch stood at his side, Josie gripped the back of her neck, forcing her head to fall back, then kissed her quivering lips.

"Quit your worrying, little bitch." He straightened, then tapped her nose, wanting more than anything to walk her over to his pack leader and personally demand Dimitri watch her with his life.

The comfortable, rather intimate gesture brought several growls from the males around him. Much to her credit, Maura didn't look at any of them. She stood tall, sucking in a deep breath. Her breasts swelled against her sweater. Long blonde hair, still slightly damp from sweat after running over the mountain, fell over her shoulders to her waist. A possessive fever burned inside Josie. Maura honored him with her presence here. He wouldn't have admitted bringing her would be a good thing. But damn. What she did to his ego—he could take on the entire *lunewulf* pack right now.

Josie watched her ass sway as she walked away from him between Nicolo and Dimitri. Heat continued frying his veins like they were full of hot lead. Turning his attention to the *lunewulf* pack leader, Josie glanced past him and took his time surveying his surroundings. Adrenaline surged to life inside him harder than it had for a long time. Fighting for anything always seemed a waste of time. The gift made him soft, he realized at that moment. No one ever challenged him enough to create fear inside him. And there was no fear now. But making sure the events of tonight assured everyone beyond any doubt that Maura would stay with him created an energy that attacked like a drug.

Several *lunewulf* males watched him warily, obviously given the assignment of herding him into the middle of the park. Hundreds of *lunewulfs* surrounded him, creating a werewolf wall of males and females, all anxious and panting, eager to witness a good fight.

Three males, one of them the asshole who'd been in the pickup truck in front of Maura's old den, stood at the other end of the circle. They jumped from foot to foot, growling and snapping at each other and the crowd around them. The faint smell of alcohol and their slightly incoherent thought patterns were indication that they'd spent the evening drinking and psyching each other up to draw first blood.

Bob Abbey howled and quickly all the others in the park turned their attention to him. These *lunewulfs* better have a fucking clue how good they had it. They exercised their ceremonies in a public park without worrying about humans interfering or panicking. Not many werewolves could claim such a luxury.

"Our traditions hold true over the centuries for one reason," Bob began, bellowing loud enough so everyone could hear him. Even the few pups present stopped playing and sat on the ground to listen. "They are what make us strong, superior over any other species on this planet. We honor them tonight with the challenge of first blood."

The howls started slowly, growing in volume until everyone in the park, males and bitches alike, threw their heads back and howled their respect toward the laws and traditions all of them, regardless of breed, honored.

Once the howling subsided, Bob cleared his voice and continued. "Tonight the Wagner den seeks the right to draw first blood." Not entirely the truth since Bob sought it out for them, but Josie wouldn't argue the detail. "This male," Bob pointed his finger at Josie, "entered the Wagner den and killed Pete Wagner. It was his private challenge, since Pete cast out his mate."

There was an uneasy silence. Josie straightened, making eye contact with the pack leader. He couldn't reach Bob's thoughts—not with so many surrounding them and the magnitude of their thoughts hitting him like hundreds of quiet whispers being carried on the frigid breeze. At that moment though, he gained new respect for the male. Bob didn't have to state why Josie killed Pete, yet he'd just informed all the *lunewulfs* that Josie's actions were honorable.

"Since he chose of his own accord in an admittedly premeditated decision not to publicly challenge Pete Wagner for his mate, the Wagner den comes forth at this time to draw first blood. Are all parties in agreement with these facts?" Bob looked at the Wagner den.

The three males yelled their agreement, almost tripping over each other in their excitement to get at Josie. The idiots barely managed to hold on to their human forms. Already their blond hair looked whiter and their teeth pressed against their lips, adding to the ridiculous scene they made.

Bob looked at Josie, who simply nodded. Josie stood, not moving, letting the wind attack his flesh. Slowly, he started fighting to move into the heads of the three males dancing in front of him just several yards away. Knowing their minds, their actions before they attacked, would make his victory simple.

Bob said something. His pack howled and cheered their approval. The noise filled the air. So many smells tried attacking his senses. This wasn't the first time he stood around so many and fought to hear just one—or in this case the thoughts of three males. And singling the drunken *lunewulfs* out was hard as fucking hell.

"I have terms." Paul Wagner, the largest of the three males, pointed a finger at Josie. "He must swear not to use his magic on us."

"Yeah!" The male who appeared to be the youngest of the three, and definitely the most wired, almost jumped from foot to foot as he shouted at his pack leader. He continually shot anxious glances at Josie as he spoke. "We get to attack and he can't do anything to stop us."

"When I caught him at my dead littermate's den with his widow there, he walked out into the yard and suddenly my truck started and headed down the street without me." Paul's accusation sent the crowd into a violent uproar.

Accusations of Malta werewolf magic and the probability that Josie could stop them without even touching them were screamed from all directions.

Josie stood silently, watching the three males get themselves overheated over something they knew nothing about.

"That's fucking enough!" Bob's outraged howl managed to silence his pack. He stormed into the middle of the circle formed by his pack. Already he had some of his larger males helping to keep those not involved in the challenge back and out of the way so there would be room for the Wagner den and Josie. "Each of you may strike once. That is the law of drawing first blood. You strike, then step back. You understand?"

The Wagner den grunted their consent, circling each other and turning to respond to comments made by their pack.

"And you, Malta werewolf." Bob walked within a few feet of him. "You'll stand there and not interfere or do anything of any kind to stop that one punch. You got me on this?"

"Understood." Josie nodded, looking past Bob at the three males who were so wound up their thoughts sped like rats racing on wheels in a cage.

"That means no tricks or magic. Got me?"

"Yup."

"Good. Don't think you'll live through the night if you fuck with our traditions."

Josie gave the pack leader his full attention. "That won't happen."

Bob stared at him for a moment, clearly wondering in his mind exactly what Josie meant. Did he mean that he wouldn't die? Or did he confirm that he wouldn't use the gift? Bob stared at him with bright blue eyes that tried piercing into him before he grunted.

Josie watched Bob turn his back to him and knew the *lunewulf* wasn't an idiot for choosing not to question Josie further on the matter.

"Now that we understand each other," Bob continued, "the oldest member of the den may begin. Move forward and strike. One movement, one moment of contact—then you back off. Once the first has moved back to join the others, then the second may approach and attack. One strike, that's it. Let the change begin!"

Josie stripped out of his shirt as an uproar sounded behind him. Two of the three Wagner males were already half changed into their fur and appeared to freeze in mid-

change as they stared past him. Josie turned in time to see Maura break free from the circle of onlookers and run to him.

"What the fuck is this?" Bob yelled. "Get back to your place, female."

"This is my place." She stood up to him, her hands fisting at her waist, but only for a second. As Josie pulled his shirt free from his body, she grabbed it. "It is my place to hold the clothes of my mate during a challenge."

In spite of the loud disapproval, voiced and thought, throughout the pack, Maura ignored all of them and waited for him to disrobe, taking his clothes. As the change washed over him, hardening his muscles and forcing blood to race through his veins faster than his human body could handle, she stepped forward, pressing her warm, moist lips to his.

"I look forward to returning to our den when you're done here," she whispered, her blue eyes sparkling defiantly as she watched him.

Already the animal in him surfaced with enough vengeance and anxiety to take on the challenge that he couldn't answer her with words. But his low growl made her smile. Slowly she backed away from him until Nicolo lunged forward and grabbed her. Josie felt something rough inside him enhance the change and he almost saw blood. He didn't want any other male touching her, not even to protect her. But there was enough human intellect still in his animal brain to help him see that Nicolo acted out of friendship. Nonetheless, he didn't turn around until Maura stood safely between Rosa and Heidi with Dimitri and Nicolo on either side of the bitches.

Josie barely turned around when the crowd screamed, violent thoughts attacking his brain from all directions. At the same time, a white blur leapt toward him, teeth and claws bared. The oldest of the den landed on top of him, digging in deep with his claws and teeth before leaping to the side.

Josie staggered and Maura's piercing scream vibrated in his brain over all the other sounds around him. If only he could completely grant the wish of the *lunewulf* pack leader and turn off the gift, if just long enough to offer first blood. But doing so would be the same as agreeing not to breathe, or smell or feel the hard, snowy ground underneath him. It was impossible not to hear their thoughts.

The *lunewulf* male danced sideways, away from Josie, his head low to the ground while long, pointed teeth clashed together. His inflictions, although minor, stung fiercely. Josie wouldn't give him the satisfaction of acknowledging any pain. He'd experienced a hell of a lot worse from quicker attacks in the past.

His littermates wagged their tails, barking anxiously for him to return to their sides so the next one could attack. Josie turned his attention to the second *lunewulf*, who anxiously waited to attack. The cuts running up and down his body from the first attack brought out raw primal instincts. He braced himself, growling in spite of the human side of his brain arguing he should keep his cool.

Fuck that. Let those damned puny *lunewulfs* know they didn't stand a chance against him. He could stand here all night and let them do their best and they wouldn't



defeat him. He glared at the second male, who trotted forward and then stopped after his older littermate returned to his side.

The middle Wagner male growled fiercely, taking his time, his simple thoughts pondering the best way to attack and do the most damage.

Josie barked, wagging his tail just to annoy the male. When the male leapt, for the briefest of moments, Josie's instincts ordered that he knock the male to the ground with his mind. All it would take was a thought. The gift ran that hard and deep inside him, pumping through him just as his blood did.

But he took the impact, this time falling to his side as the *lunewulf* male's teeth sunk deep into his hide.

Josie howled. *Fuck! Shit!* It hurt like hell. Worse than hell. Blood warmed his flesh and made his coat sticky when he struggled to his paws. The smell of it turned his stomach and twisted his insides. Fury boiled over the top. He lowered his head, snarling as he dared the youngest littermate to make it a damned good shot.

Because once he was through, Josie would send the three of them running for their lives. And he couldn't fucking wait. The lot of them smelled of cowardice, of their self-righteous, triumphant attitude. The way they attacked, leapt at him, not one of them trying to make their blow critical, proved they had never experienced fighting for their life, their next meal or for the right to sleep in a warm den. They were weak, pups with no knowledge of how to truly attack or do battle. Damned shame he wouldn't be giving them the time to learn how it was properly done.

The youngest male didn't leap like his littermates did. Instead he ran straight into Josie, reaching for the throat with long, thick, dagger-like teeth. Possibly Josie had underestimated this den after all. His heart sped to a dangerous speed while he dug his claws into the frozen ground, fighting every inch of instinct burning in his veins.

Tradition would be honored. Right to draw first blood meant just that. He had to stand still and allow each of them the opportunity to attack and draw blood however they could. If the right vein was punctured, the quick strike done just right, that one blow could be deadly.

The young punk, his thoughts muddled from alcohol, aimed for the jugular. If he reached into the *lunewulf's* mind, let the gift come forth as instinct demanded that he should and prevented the inevitable, then Josie would be no better than the cowards he'd just labeled around him.

Honor and tradition meant more than allowing the *lunewulf* pack and his own packmates, as well as Maura, from seeing him turn coward at the last moment.

Josie howled, feeling the thick, long teeth puncture his flesh and the pain bite deep. He glared down at the *lunewulf* male, seeing him stagger backward as if the taste of Josie's blood didn't appeal to him. Red stained his white fur and he shook his head fiercely as his pack screamed and yelled loudly around them.

All of their thoughts bombarded his brain at once. The young male in front of him stared up at him, standing a good half foot shorter than Josie and watching, as if curious to see what damage he had inflicted.

First blood was over.

He now had the right to see the challenge through, or back down and retreat. The next move was his. But if his jugular had been hit, he wouldn't be able to attack for long. Not much killed a werewolf that quickly. But breaking the neck or hitting a major artery would do him in. Within minutes his world would fade and he would collapse, resuming his human form and dying.

And he'd given his word that wouldn't happen tonight.

Had the *lunewulf* missed his jugular?

With such a direct attack, it would be amazing if he had. And why did the male stagger backward, shaking his head as if trying to get Josie's blood off him? Not to mention there should be more blood.

Something wasn't right. Standing there, blood soaking his coat and the frigid night air seeping into his hide, Josie dwelt on the focal points of pain in his body. The young *lunewulf* had lunged for his jugular, yet for some reason, Josie didn't collapse. Later he'd figure out why he still seemed able to function. In spite of the pain racking his insides, Josie leapt at the young male, sending him tumbling like a bowling ball into his two littermates.

*It appears you missed your target*, Josie snarled at the three males as they fell head over paws, their bodies tangling with each other.

Cries for blood filled the night as their pack urged them to fight, to finish off the Malta werewolf, to show his breed once and for all that *lunewulfs* shouldn't be messed with. Josie grabbed the nearest male by the back, latching onto the loose flesh covering his shoulder blades, and picked him up, shaking him like a rag doll. This time when he tossed him into his littermates, all three of them tumbled even farther away from him. They looked like they danced around each other, fighting and struggling to create as much distance between him and them as possible.

*Lunewulfs* were smaller than Malta werewolves. Josie easily glared down at the three males as they struggled to stand. But then they showed him their greatest asset—speed. And at that moment he remembered his agreement not to use the gift. It hit him harder than any of the *lunewulfs* had just as he instinctively readied to send all three of them rolling into each other again. He almost fucked up in front of everyone.

Something unfamiliar washed over him, a warmth that swelled uncomfortably. He didn't like it and wasn't going to accept that it could be nervousness, embarrassment or humiliation. Josie never worried about fighting. There wasn't any reason to fear or hesitate at any challenge. The gift took care of him, and for as long as Josie remembered, he always took care of and protected the gift. Especially now, with the pack regaining ground and their reputation.

Which was why, with the *lunewulf* and his own pack members watching, it mattered more than ever that he honor his agreement not to use the gift. There was no way to turn off hearing their thoughts. But he could keep from sending them flying through the air or from moving anything with his mind.

If he really fucking concentrated.

Which he had to fucking do—he promised that he would.

At the same time one of the males charged into him, the other two attacked from either side. Howls and screams vibrated in his brain as the *lunewulf* pack sounded like they had just gone ballistic. So many minds, filled with bloodlust, pounded his brain and made it damned hard to stay focused.

And the *lunewulf* males pounded his body.

*Don't use the gift. Just fucking don't use the gift.* He repeated his mantra, focusing on his own thoughts as a defense against blocking out all of the wired feelings surrounding him.

Josie focused, plowing over one of the males and swatting another, sending him tumbling head over paws. One of them pounced on him, tearing into his hide with teeth that felt like they ripped the flesh right off his back.

*Fucking son of a bitch!*

He fought like a goddamned pup. Probably because he'd been a pup the last time he fought without the gift.

He howled, barely hearing his own voice over the multitude of those around him. The pain surged through him like fire piercing from between his shoulder blades and spreading faster over every inch of his body than he could run. Sticky, hot blood seared his flesh, making his fur clump and pull and snag from the roots.

He would dishonor his pack if he used the gift. And he would dishonor his pack if he lost the challenge.

Being overcome by the three piss-ass males annoyed him as much as the pain did. Facing humiliation if he lost the challenge after offering first blood would be worse than death. And he had no intention of fucking dying.

Throwing all his weight into the *lunewulf* next to him—all the damned white fur made it impossible to tell which male was which—Josie trampled the werewolf, hearing his screams and howls underneath him. Standing on the male with his hind legs, he leapt off him, grabbing another one with his teeth and taking him down.

Blood raced down his throat, gagging him. The metallic taste turned his stomach and so much of the liquid flowed out of his mouth as his teeth tore flesh that every inch of him dripped with the foul, sticky stuff. The extreme cold air made the blood freeze on his coat. At the same time he swallowed so much it choked him, but he'd be damned if he would let go.

*Don't use the fucking gift.* He continued the mantra in his head.

But there was that damned third male, again on his back, howling and ripping at Josie's hide. It got to where he couldn't even tell where the pain came from. His mind wouldn't focus. Blood and white fur filled his vision, and as long fangs once again ripped into him, he swore the fur in his face turned to white flesh.

Josie wasn't sure. He was soaked, fucking cold as hell and the screaming and yelling seemed to blur into a dull roar, making his brain hurt as bad as his body. One thing hit him as the pain got so fucking intense that it took over his ability to think straight—he wasn't dead.

But had he just killed one of them? Where were the other two? Hell. He couldn't see a fucking thing.

As he fell to the hard, frozen, snow-packed ground, he was still in his fur. Blackness smothered him as the sounds around him faded. But if he were dead, he would resume his human form. That wasn't happening. At least he was pretty damned sure that he was still in werewolf form when he passed out from the pain.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

Maura's hair blinded her as she struggled against the strong hands that prevented her from running to Josie.

Rosa spoke next to her. "You can't run to him. They will attack you without thought right now while still in their blood rage."

"Let me go!" she screamed, her throat burning. "They're going to kill him."

"I can't believe he didn't use the gift." Nicolo, whose hands were on her, spoke way too calmly.

She shoved her hair out of her face, looking around her in disbelief at the Malta werewolves who discussed this barbaric attack as calmly as if it were some game. Like when it was over, Josie would simply stand up and brush the blood off him and they would all walk home for a drink.

Heidi stood next to her, her expression pinched as she stared at the bloodbath occurring before all of them. She turned when Maura looked at her.

"Perry Wagner is dead." Her face seemed frozen in a twisted, nauseated-looking expression. "I'm not sure if the other two are going to make it or not."

"Fuck!" Dimitri hissed as he stood on the other side of Rosa with his fists shoved against his hips.

Maura watched him as he watched the fight. Since she met him he always looked pissed, but now, his expression contorted into something worse. He was horror-stricken.

She spun around, knowing before she looked that her worst fear had happened.

Josie fell, hitting the ground so hard she swore it vibrated under her feet. Perry, Pete's younger littermate that she'd never known that well, was dead. His naked human body lay in a pool of blood that stained the already dirty snow. Paul Wagner crawled away from Josie, seriously injured. The youngest of their den, Phil Wagner, fell off Josie, taking his time standing as if slightly bewildered.

An overwhelming urge to protect Josie, to stop Phil from attacking again, hit Maura so hard she tasted it in her mouth. Fighting Nicolo so furiously that his fingers stung her flesh, Maura screamed. There was so much noise going on around her that no one heard her. But Josie was down, his large body in a pool of blood almost as dark as his black coat. No way in hell would she allow that young punk to take that crucial bite that would end Josie's life.

Dimitri spoke over her head, his tone low and serious, what he said making no sense. It took her a minute to realize he quietly made a phone call, asking someone from his pack to drive here so they could get Josie out of there. There was no way they could

carry his body back to the Malta pack in their fur. But his voice turned into an annoying buzz that pissed her off even further.

"I've got her," Rosa said, suddenly standing in front of her. The pretty bitch stared at her with concerned, dark eyes. "He's going to be okay," she whispered. "Trust me, okay?" Then she lowered her voice even more, speaking only so Maura heard her. "No one made me promise not to use the gift."

At the same time that she spoke, Phil Wagner fell backward, as if knocked over. Rosa continued looking at Maura, but glancing past her shoulder, Maura saw that Phil couldn't get up, like someone was pinning him to the ground.

Bob seemed convinced that Phil not getting up meant the challenge was over and quickly entered the circle. Dimitri almost shoved her into Rosa's arms, moving past her with Nicolo at his side. Maura watched the two werewolves stand over Josie's unconscious body, growling and daring any of the *lunewulfs* to get anywhere near him.

The chaos surrounding them made it even harder to think straight. It seemed hours passed, and the cold grew so unbearable that Maura shook uncontrollably when finally several other Malta werewolf males ran into the park. Nicolo and Dimitri continued to stand on either side of Josie when other members of his pack picked him up and carried him to a truck idling in the street.

"There won't be enough room in the truck," Rosa told Maura. "Before Dimitri starts barking orders when he's not thinking straight, let's get out of here. We'll be back at the pack before they get there."

Maura couldn't take her gaze away from Josie's dark body, tears burning her eyes as she watched until the males placed him in the back of a pickup truck. A couple of them climbed into the back with him while the driver, Nicolo and Heidi climbed into the cab. Maura's pack—no, her old pack—pounced around each other like they'd just been to the best party of the year. She hated each and every one of them. The high, pulsing energy radiating off them turned her stomach.

"You cool?" Rosa looked at her, her dark, intense eyes probing her face.

Maura felt too exposed standing next to the concerned bitch. When Josie crawled into her mind it made her feel warm, like he touched her even more intimately than he could with his hands. But Rosa invaded a space that at the moment Maura didn't completely understand. Her own breed, all the *lunewulfs* lingering in the park rehashing every blow of the challenge, pissed her off more than when Pete dropped her off on the highway and threw her away. None of them gave a rat's ass that she cared more about Josie than any of the Wagner den. None of them cared about her.

"You two." Dimitri walked over to them quickly, still on his cell phone and all business. "You're with me." He stopped for a moment, staring at Maura, as if for a moment he hesitated on whether to take her with him and Rosa or leave her here with the *lunewulf* pack.

"I'm cool." Maura turned to Rosa, getting even more pissed at the way the Malta werewolf pack leader looked at her. "Let's get the fuck out of here."

She didn't know why it surprised her that no one stopped them or said anything when they headed down the street. Once she thought of this pack as her home, as a strong group of *lunewulfs* who she thought had her back. She would have fought for any of them up until the other day. Now she filled her lungs with the freezing night air, held her head high and put her past behind her.

She stared at the taillights of the truck with the Malta werewolves in it and Josie's unconscious body lying in the back. More than anything she wished she were in that truck with him, holding him so the bumps in the road wouldn't hurt his injuries more. Her eyes burned as she watched them. Rosa and Dimitri walked down the middle of the street on either side of her, not speaking, but their intense energy made her skin tingle. *Lunewulfs* on the street made random comments as they passed by but she ignored them, aching to get out of town and never look back. She didn't know what to expect from her immediate future, but one thing was for sure—after tonight, there was nothing left in this pack for her.

*Please let Josie be okay.*

Maura sat quietly in the dimly lit den and watched Maria Anthony, Rosa's mother, as the older bitch's arthritic-looking hands pressed into Josie's black coat. "He's staying in his fur on purpose, I'd say." She pursed her lips, sniffing as she leaned close to him and ran her fingers through his matted fur. "He's got some nasty cuts but his heart is beating strong. Let him sleep it off. We'll see what the damage is like once he comes to."

If Maria were twenty years younger, Maura might have experienced a sting of jealousy. As it was, the sooner everyone got the hell out of Josie's den, the better. The urge to protect and care for Josie burned deep inside her. Maura didn't want Maria discovering where Josie's wounds were. She wanted to do that. Straightening from where she squatted next to Josie, she built up the fire in the fireplace, fighting for the patience needed to survive until they all left.

When Dimitri stood, the others followed suit, his pack members staring down at Josie as he stretched out in his fur on his living room floor. In werewolf form, his large body took up most of the floor space.

She smelled Dimitri's, as well as Nicolo's and Heidi's concern and worry. Rosa moved next to her mother, but gave Maura a reassuring smile when their gazes met.

"Maura will take care of him." Rosa patted her mother's hand, but glanced at Dimitri when she spoke. "We should head back to our dens."

Maura silently thanked Rosa for voicing her thoughts, knowing the bitch heard her. Nicolo and Heidi got ready to go as well. Heidi grabbed Maura's hands, squeezing them and then pulling her into a hug.

"He'll be fine. You know he will be," she whispered, holding Maura tightly for a moment before letting her go.

Dimitri left last, taking his time silently staring down at the large werewolf stretched out on the floor and smelling grossly of drying blood before closing the door

behind him. Maura searched the den once she was alone, finding all the blankets there were and then nesting them around Josie. She then found a bucket, filled it with warm water and grabbed a washcloth before hauling her supplies.

"That fireplace sure makes it warm in here," she told Josie, although he didn't move other than the slow rise and fall of his incredibly large chest. She knelt next to him. "I sure hope you don't wake up swinging if startled."

Soaking the cloth, she slowly started cleaning the dried blood from his coat. Maura stroked his forehead, his wide, hard cheekbones and the length of his jaw. She wiped blood from his nose, around his eyes and then ran the cloth down his long, thick neck. Continually dipping the cloth in the water then wringing it out, she cleaned Josie—her mate.

When the water in the bucket turned rusty-colored, she hauled it back to the kitchen, dumped it, then filled it with slightly warmer water. After putting another log on the fire, she resumed her position, wiping sweat from her forehead then dunking the cloth and again continuing her task of cleaning his massive body.

The fire danced eagerly in the hearth, making the den incredibly toasty. Sweat trickled down her spine, dampening her clothes. She licked her lips, dunked the cloth again, then touched his chest where the blood smelled the thickest.

Josie jumped.

Maura shrieked. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

She touched the deep cut again and fresh blood soaked her cloth and hand. "Shit. Oh shit. If you had changed back into your skin, then your doctor would have treated you. Now lay still, please. I've got to clean this."

Her heart swelled to her throat when a low growl rumbled inside him. Goose bumps spread over her skin, chilling her damp body. "Why did you do this, Josie? Why? You pinned me to the wall. Yet you let those three assholes do this to you. I don't get it."

He jumped when she pressed the cloth to the worst of his cuts, a nasty gash that looked like it barely missed his jugular. Another cut, longer and almost as deep spread over his shoulder blades.

"If you'd change, we could wrap these wounds." She searched his face while gently pressing the wet cloth into his coat. She swore his jaw tightened, as if he endured the pain, but she wasn't sure.

He was so large as a werewolf that kneeling over him wasn't an option. And lifting him was out of the question. There was no way she could wrap bandages around his wounds, not even the one on his neck. Even when she gently tried lifting his head, he either refused to let her or was simply too heavy for her human muscles to handle. All she could do was continue bathing him and keep the room warm since she was making his body wet.

By the time she finished cleaning every inch of him, she ached from head to toe. She'd managed to make herself pretty wet too and she shivered when she took the



bucket back to the kitchen. Leaving it on the counter, she checked the back door, making sure it was locked, then glanced into the blackness beyond the window over the sink. She turned off the kitchen light, encasing herself in darkness, and padded back into the living room where she finally took time to take off her shoes and socks and then strip out of her wet clothes.

In spite of the warmth from the fire, she shivered, stepping gingerly around Josie, who breathed heavily as he slept soundly. His black, massive body called to her, and with a quick glance at the couch, Maura opted for the floor next to him. As worn out as she was, she would wake up faster if he moved next to her or his smell changed in the night.

Hurrying into his bedroom, she tugged and yanked until she was able to pull the large, thick quilt off his bed. The smell of their earlier lovemaking still lingered in the fabric and her insides stirred, a yearning to feel him buried deep inside her coming to life with a vengeance.

She dragged the blanket into the living room, not even attempting to smooth it out on the floor before standing on top of it and then moving to her knees.

"I don't know about you, but I'm beat. When we wake up, we're going to have a long talk about this challenge stuff. I'm not too sure I'm hip on the idea of you continuing to pull stunts like this." She bunched part of the big quilt into a pillow, watching Josie's chest rise and fall steadily as she spoke. "You're going to be fine tomorrow," she murmured, more to herself than to him.

He probably knew exactly how he would be in the morning. More than likely he lay there resting, completely content other than from the pain of some deep wounds that would be healed over the next few days.

*Can you hear my thoughts, wolf man?* she asked in her mind. *Because if you can and you think I'm going to put out after how much you've worn me out tonight, you've got another think coming.* Again she watched his body, anxiously waiting to see some kind of movement somewhere—his eyes under his eyelids, anything. But nothing moved. Other than his steady breathing, he remained completely relaxed in a deep slumber, which was where she needed to be.

Cuddling up alongside his large body, Josie's long, thick black fur tickled her skin as she relaxed next to him. If he weren't so seriously injured, she might have wrapped her arm and leg around him. As it was, she stared at his face, letting her vision blur on his thick, long, shiny canines that stuck out underneath his lips. Slowly, she faded off to sleep.

Her body relaxed, but her mind kept twisting around the events of the past couple days. Everything in her world was different now. Breathing in Josie's scent, even in her sleep, kept her more than aware of how much it had changed.

Stretching her leg, Maura ran her toes over Josie's thick, smooth fur, feeling roped muscles twitch in his thigh. She blinked a few times, not sure if she'd truly slept at all, and gazed at his powerful profile. His eye blinked, the only one she could see at the

moment, and then slowly opened. Her insides quickened as her vision grew more acute in the darkness. She watched while Josie seemed to register his surroundings and then slowly lowered his gaze to her.

A low rumble vibrated his entire body. Maura stiffened, wondering how coherent he really was, and then struggled to sit. One large paw, with claws extending well past his black fur, moved to her tummy and prevented her movement. She felt her heart pounding inside her while she watched him.

Instinct prevailed and was stronger when a werewolf was in his fur. Reasoning with him right now would be damned near impossible to do. Keeping her breathing steady, she licked her lips. A wounded animal, even if he was a werewolf, needed to be dealt with very delicately.

"Since you're awake, I thought I would offer you some water. Are you thirsty?" There was no way to tell how coherent he was but he didn't move at her suggestion. She remained pinned under his deadly paw while his gaze stayed locked on hers. She tried again. "All I'm going to do is get the water and then I'll be right back. I promise."

Sensing accurately that his possessive alpha instincts were at their strongest, even in his injured state, she looked down when his heavy paw slid off her bare tummy. She held her breath, watching those deadly claws rake over her flesh.

Josie raised his head quickly before she could stand and sniffed her body where his paw had just been. As if he needed to see that he hadn't hurt her when moving his claws along her skin, his cold nose touched her stomach, and then he licked her.

His large, long red tongue was very warm and moist. Maura shivered, fighting the need that quickly attacked her insides. Desire ransacked her body and she shivered, sucking air into her suddenly dry mouth. The rich smell of desire clung to the warm air around them.

"I'll bring you some water." Her legs were about as effective as standing on wet noodles.

And his senses would be heightened in his fur. Josie probably sniffed out the moment her pussy got wet, in spite of how injured he was.

Walking away from that large, virile body, barefoot against the cold floor, helped clear her head a bit. Nonetheless, her hands trembled when she opened cabinets until she found a large-mouthed plastic cup, one that he purchased at a convenience store. It would work perfectly to offer her werewolf a cold drink.

Icy cold water dripped over her fingers and tickled a path down her forearm when she carried the cup back to Josie. He lay sprawled across the living room floor, taking up every inch of space between his couch and the opposite wall in front of the fireplace. Malta werewolves were huge as men, but in their fur...damn. Josie looked dangerous as hell, even lying with his eyes closed and head relaxed on the floor.

"Josie," she whispered, moving to her knees and putting the cup down, then stroking the side of his head with her fingers. "Some water might do you some good."

The rumbling sound he made didn't quite sound like a growl. At the same time his scent changed, growing muskier, more male-smelling. A funny sense told her that he liked her petting him. The water would wait a minute. Maura combed her fingers through his thick, black coat, being careful to avoid the deep gashes in his flesh that still left parts of his fur damp. She didn't understand his refusal to change into his flesh. It would be so much easier to see how badly hurt he was without all this black fur covering up his wounds.

"That's what it is, isn't it?" she said softly, cocking her head and digging her fingernails deep into his coat so she could scratch the skin next to his ear. "You aren't changing so it won't be obvious how badly injured you are. Well, listen here, wolf man—a little blood never hurt anyone. I could take care of you better if you would change."

Josie lifted his head, gazing at her with his almond-shaped eyes that suddenly seemed to glow like silver orbs in the darkness. He pushed his nose against her thigh and then ran his long, moist tongue up the inside of her leg.

"Shit. Oh fuck." She collapsed onto her ass, a slapping sound cracking in the air when her bare bottom hit the floor. "Okay. We both know how well you can take care of me."

She laughed nervously and then tried to regain a bit more of a composed sitting position. But Josie pushed his big head into her, making it damned awkward to bring her legs together. When his chest expanded she knew he inhaled her scent, filling his body with the smell of her lust.

"You're injured," she reminded him. "And besides, you refuse to change back into a man."

The look he gave her showed he didn't approve of any reprimand. His face was so large. He had the broadest cheekbones she'd ever seen on a werewolf. And his thick, long black hair—along with his raw, masculine scent—made him appear even more dangerous than he was at the moment. His eyes brimmed with determination though. She wouldn't bank on his inability to do anything at the moment.

"How about that water now?" Her hands shook when she lifted the big cup and held it to his mouth.

Josie's long tongue dipped into the cold water, splashing it over her hands and down her arms as he lapped. She shivered and her nipples got so damned hard the painful need shot like electric currents from her breasts straight to her pussy.

When he drank his fill, Josie raised his head and licked her face. It blinded her momentarily and she laughed and cried out at the same time, doing her best not to dump the remaining water over the two of them.

"At least let me put the cup down," she managed to spit out as he continued his meticulous task of cleaning her face.

Even hurt, his strength grossly outnumbered hers. Josie stopped licking her face and she put down the cup, unable to look away from his intense stare.

"It really would be a good idea if you tried to sleep so your injuries would heal," she managed to whisper, although her body zinged with so much energy she doubted she would do any more sleeping tonight. A hard run probably wouldn't rid her of the wound-up need he'd created inside her.

Josie grunted and the sound was more human than werewolf. He stretched forward, pressing into her with enough of his weight that she fell backward onto the blanket she'd brought out earlier. He stretched over her, pinning her with his body while each of his front legs rested on either side of her.

His long, coarse hair tortured her nipples. Pressure swelled in her womb and her lust created a ripe, rich smell that turned her on even further. It was obviously having an impact on Josie too. He lowered his head, sniffing her breasts and sending goose bumps racing over her skin.

"Josie. Shit. You're going to make me insane and you're hurt."

He ignored her pleas for sane behavior. Adjusting his weight, he moved enough that his head rested on her pelvic bone. Slowly he moved, looking like he simply wished to inhale the air just above her pussy. Maura lay on the floor, running her hand gently over one shoulder and stroking his thick black fur.

"What are you doing, wolf man?" she asked.

She watched him move slightly. Unable to get a single muscle in her body to cooperate with her at the moment, she didn't try adjusting her body. Inhaling his musky scent made her feel drunk. The predator lying over her was created to kill, with his deadly fangs inches from her unprotected flesh. It made her heart race even harder.

"I wish you would take your human form," she whispered, smelling her sadness in spite of her effort to hide it.

Josie's eyes glowed in the darkness, and then slowly he closed them. His body weight was almost too much for her but she wouldn't complain. Instead, relaxing underneath him, her body continued to tingle with need until finally she managed to drift off to sleep.

## Chapter Fourteen

Josie stepped out of the shower, feeling stiffer than when he'd gotten in. Damn. Hot showers were supposed to make him feel better. All he felt was clean.

Which was probably a good thing in itself.

Rubbing a circle into the fogged-over mirror with the side of his fist, he surveyed the damage as he began finger combing his hair. The worst of it wouldn't be seen on his flesh. His pride and ego took a bruising worse than anything he ever experienced before last night.

"More than likely no one else gave it a thought," he grumbled, telling himself for the hundredth time that his pack members didn't think about how often he fought and used the gift.

And it had been three against one. But they were three *lunewulf* males and he should have kicked their asses within seconds—any other time, he would have.

Turning in front of the mirror, he towel dried while stretching to see the nasty gash between his shoulder blades. It looked about as bad as the cut starting at the base of his neck and moving past his collarbone. Both would heal and probably not scar too terribly bad if he took the time to have them treated. Something he wouldn't do except for the little bitch who slept beautifully on his living room floor right now.

God, he couldn't wait to fuck her. And he would soon. But right now he needed to get out of his den and tend to some business before she woke up and wanted to run with him—or worse yet, play nursemaid and make him stay in his den all day.

Taking care to move quietly, Josie dressed and slipped out of his den, leaving Maura asleep and wrapped up in his quilt in front of the fire. The cold air attacked immediately and the dark gray sky looming overhead advertised the storm he could smell when he filled his lungs with the midday mountain air. He would have to get his errands done quickly before it cut loose. Without having heard a weather forecast, he guessed by the smell of things and how quiet it was outside that they were in for some serious snow—and soon.

His first stop wouldn't take too long. He would know the truth the second he got there. The tires crunched and slid slightly over the packed snow as he drove along the narrow road they'd cleared after first settling the pack here. It was rough and uneven but better than trying to maneuver some of their cars over a rocky mountainside. It wasn't always convenient for a werewolf to run in his fur, especially when Malta territory wasn't one hundred percent secure from curious and destructive humans.

Josie pulled in front of the small, clean-looking den, surprised to see Nicolo's truck already there.

"I figured you would show up soon." Rosa answered the door to her den, refusing to make eye contact but instead looking somewhere around his chest.

*Just because you promised not to use the gift during the challenge didn't mean that I made that promise. So yes, to answer your question, I did what I could to keep them from attacking you without making it obvious the gift was at play.* Rosa offered the information he sought willingly, sharing her thoughts with him before backing out of the doorway and allowing him entrance into her den.

"Oh good." Maria, her mother, clapped her hands and jumped out of her seat. She moved pretty damned quickly for a bitch of her age—proof of her excitement to get her claws on him and start inflicting pain on his healing incisions with her salves and medicines. "Nicolo. Move that chair over here. Rosa, you aren't mated, dear. Give us a few minutes while Josie removes his shirt so that I can see those wounds."

"He's not here to have you look at him, Mother." Rosa crossed her arms over her chest, squishing her breasts together and offering a nice view of her cleavage. She was built almost as well as Maura, but her caramel-colored skin gave her a mysterious allure where Maura was creamy white and much more stunning. Rosa glared at him when she heard his thoughts. "But since he's here, I'll get the cream that you keep in the bathroom. It only burns a bit, Josie." She smiled cruelly as she left the rest of them in the living room.

Nicolo didn't look too pleased to be given the task of rearranging furniture so Josie could be poked and prodded by the old bitch. Heidi stood in the doorway leading to the back part of the den, watching curiously when Maria grabbed Josie's arm and pulled him to the chair.

She wouldn't have budged him an inch if he didn't consent to being moved. The small Malta female was half his size, with her gray hair sticking out of a messy braid that she'd wrapped in a circle around the back of her head. Her bony fingers barely reached around his wrist, but she didn't seem to notice or care about the size difference as she pointed authoritatively to the chair Nicolo had set out for him.

"Sit and get out of that shirt." She barked her orders, filling the room with a minty smell of contentment, her frazzled thought pattern giving a vague clue as to how thrilled she was to suddenly have a purpose.

"Where's Maura?" Heidi asked. She still stood in the doorway and when he glanced toward the bitch, Rosa stood behind her, eyeballing him as he removed his shirt.

*How do I compare to Dimitri, bitch?* He teased Rosa with his thoughts, fighting a smile when her dark cheeks turned crimson. She looked down, letting her long black hair fall partially over her face.

"She's asleep at the den," Josie told her.

"We should go get her." Heidi turned to Rosa.

"You're not leaving the pack. Not with a blizzard coming in," Nicolo decided, but then moved to the couch, sitting and facing Josie so he could get a good view of the

damage on his body before Maria went to work. "You put up a good fight last night. Impressive as hell."

"Two of them still live." Not that he cared if all of them lived through the challenge. But a good werewolf would kill his opponent. Heat from the shame that he wasn't a good fighter without the gift burned painfully inside him.

"You honor Malta werewolves by showing the *lunewulfs* that we aren't out to destroy them."

"Good story, my friend," Josie said, not believing a word of it even though he didn't hear that it was a lie when he probed Nicolo's mind. "Where is your littermate today?"

"I haven't heard from him yet today. Heidi wanted to come spend time with Rosa so I brought her here. As soon as you're done getting played with there," Nicolo winked at Maria when she curled her lip and growled at him, "we should head up the mountain and get him, then make sure we're ready for a good storm."

"If you three are going to run and play all day then we're going to go get Maura," Heidi decided. "*Lunewulf* bitches don't take nicely to being caged up in a den all day."

"Oh, you have it so rough." Nicolo leapt off the couch and grabbed his mate.

Heidi squealed, delighted with her mate's attention. And truth have it, the little bitch did have it pretty good considering most of his pack still growled at her. Heidi had befriended Rosa and Josie knew the gift ran strong in the bitch. No one would fuck with his mate while she ran with Rosa.

"I'm sure she'd love to spend time with you." Josie turned in spite of Maria slapping at him to be still. "And while you three bitches howl about how rough you have it, we'll be out sweating in a snowstorm to make sure you continue having it good."

"You do that," Heidi said, her head barely visible with Nicolo's large arms wrapped around her. She laughed and then twisted against her mate. "Are you happy to be so close to me or is your cell phone vibrating?"

"Little bitch," he growled, but then secured her in his arms while digging his phone out of his pocket. When he glanced at Josie, his thoughts made it clear who was calling. "Speak of the devil," he said, then answered the phone. "What's up?"

Dimitri's low voice coming through the phone tickled Josie's ears. Nicolo always was an open mind to read, but he didn't focus on his friend's thoughts as much as he did on what Maria was doing to him. He glanced down at the sticky, cold medicine she carefully rubbed into the wounds on his torso. The rancid smell of the shit would annoy him long before the pain from the cuts would.

"You're hurt worse than you let on." Maria stared at him with pale, glassy eyes, her expression warm and concerned as she wiped her hands on her apron wrapped around her thin waist.

"I'm fine." He looked away toward Nicolo when the male's thoughts grew upset.

Heidi stilled in his arms and Rosa watched him with alert brown eyes. Her scent changed as the room got quiet. More than likely she grabbed Nicolo's thoughts as quickly as Josie did.

"I wouldn't look at it as a problem." Even as Nicolo worked to soothe Dimitri's temper, his mind justified his littermate's actions. No matter how often Dimitri proved to be an ass, Nicolo never saw him that way. "We're all over here at Maria and Rosa Anthony's den. Just head this way. Yeah, he is here getting tortured as we speak."

Josie growled, anxious to get his shirt back on when he realized what had happened. "Dimitri has Maura?" he asked, even though he knew the answer. His packmates didn't like it when he responded to their thoughts. It was better to ask questions and wait to let them voice the answers. Although sometimes he'd get more accomplished if he could simply act on what he heard in their minds.

"Apparently she left your den and was walking down the road. Dimitri isn't sure yet how the pack will react to another *lunewulf* bitch among us."

"Thank you, Maria. I feel better already." Josie stood in spite of Maria's efforts to keep him in the chair longer. Reaching for his shirt, he then grabbed the back of the chair. "The least I can do is help get your den back in order before you have more than a houseful."

"Leave him be, Mom." Rosa moved and put her hands on her mother's shoulders. "He thinks he can keep his brand-new mate from inspecting him from head to toe if he tries to outrun her."

"You can't outrun a *lunewulf* bitch." Heidi laughed, but then cocked her head at Josie. "Are you okay?"

"He's hurt pretty bad and seems to think all that muscle will keep anyone from noticing." Maria stuck her chin out stubbornly. She planned on sticking to that story, and would more than likely advertise the news the second she had a chance to howl about it.

"I promise I'll live to fight another challenge." He winked at the old bitch, which didn't faze her a bit.

"Trust me. I've seen him take on a hell of a lot more than three males before and win," Nicolo offered.

"But never when he promised not to use the gift to fight." Rosa looked directly at him, her scent turning defiant.

"That's right." Nicolo looked at him as if he'd just figured something out—and he had. "Those males did demand the gift not be used. You usually send males flying when you fight."

Josie didn't want this conversation. The last thing he needed was all of them seeing how weak he was without the gift.

"I have no problem honoring a request during a challenge." He turned toward the door when the sound of tires crunching over snow grabbed all of their attention.



Rosa moved around them, her thoughts turning toward Dimitri. She combed her thick black hair with her fingers as she hurried to the door. For the life of him, Josie couldn't figure out what the bitch saw in Dimitri. He was cranky and always smelled of a foul temper. For some reason she saw that as a challenge, and even more surprisingly, found him good-looking. Just more proof that bitches were damn hard to figure out.

At the moment though, Josie was thankful for the distraction of their arrival. It got the conversation off the challenge and why he'd fought so poorly.

"Josie." Maura burst into the den smelling better than anything he'd inhaled so far today. Her blue eyes lit up like sapphires when she saw him and instantly she was in his arms. "Why did you leave me?" she asked quietly.

"The last thing I'll have is her roaming the pack," Dimitri barked, pointing a finger at Maura's back and glaring at him.

"Thanks for bringing her to me." Josie ignored Dimitri's foul mood. He also ignored the irritating ointment clinging to his flesh. "Are we going to sand the roads before it starts snowing?"

"I already put a few calls in." Dimitri studied Josie's face, then glanced at the rest of him.

He had questions about last night—questions Josie didn't want to answer in front of everyone. When Rosa looked from Dimitri to him, her frown didn't sit well. Maura looked at him too while her fingers gently probed his chest.

"Do you have to work today?" Maura asked him, keeping her back to the rest of his pack and looking up at him questioningly. "I smell the medicine on you. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine." They would not start in on a conversation about the challenge last night. "Heidi and Rosa will hang with you. We'll be back later."

Maura's expression faded, her face going blank while her mind suddenly rushed faster than a mountain creek. *He took off without waking me this morning and now he's closing himself off to me. But why?*

Ignoring Rosa's frown over Maura's thoughts, Josie brought Maura's hands to his mouth, inhaling her sweet scent deep into his lungs and then tasting her. While he ran along the mountain today, at least he would have her buried in his senses. Although it wasn't like she wasn't branded into his mind already.

Josie put Maura at arm's length and kept his expression calm when he met Rosa's attentive look. *Share any of the random thoughts you are pulling from my brain with Maura and I'll make sure Dimitri finds you a mate who will make you miserable for life,* he told Rosa with this mind. Her eyes got wide before she tossed her long hair over her shoulder and turned away from him, focusing on Dimitri.

*Go to hell, wolf man.* Her response didn't reassure him that she would refrain from sharing her opinion as to why Josie seemed so closemouthed all of a sudden.

"Bring your kill by later and I'll serve it up hot for you," Rosa whispered to Dimitri and ran her finger down his arm.

Nicolo didn't hide his grin and Dimitri scowled further, deciding not to respond, more than likely because the bitch rendered him speechless.

"I'll come get you later." Josie reached for Maura's jaw, holding it firmly in his hand and then planting a warm kiss on her soft lips. Hopefully that would calm her frazzled thoughts and keep her from pondering out loud too much in front of the other bitches.

He followed Dimitri and Nicolo into Valle, the three of them deciding hot coffee and catching up on today's pack news from the surrounding territories would be the best way to get the day started. No more than five minutes after they were inside Bernie's Den, the questions started.

"Hear you tore into some *lunewulfs* last night?" Bernie was an oversized American werewolf with arms the size of small tree trunks. He wiped down the counter in front of Josie and the others and grinned, showing off a few black holes where teeth used to be.

"I can imagine how everyone is howling about it," Josie said lightly, more than aware of the other werewolves leaning in to catch what they could and confirm or deny the rumors that were likely flying around like bats in a cave.

"It was all I heard late into the night last night." Bernie turned from them, grabbing damp glasses from a drying rack and heading over to the tap. "When the pack settled in here after their run, it was all they talked about. Something about you killing a *lunewolf* and his den challenging you to draw first blood."

"Sounds like you Americans have a pretty good grapevine running through your pack." Nicolo got comfortable on the barstool next to Josie but then declined the free beer offered. "Coffee, black if you don't mind. Just got out of the den and need to wake up first."

"So there really was a challenge to draw first blood?" Bernie's excitement almost drowned out the smell of stale beer that lingered everywhere in the place. "How many of them did you kill?"

Ollie Grayson, the American pack leader, and Larry Shank, another American who was about as thick and large as Ollie, sauntered into Bernie's. Both of them picked up the pace the moment they saw Josie, Dimitri and Nicolo.

Josie turned when Dimitri sniffed the overwhelming excitement and adrenaline that hung heavy around all of them. The two pack leaders nodded, acknowledging each other. But Ollie wanted the same news his bartender did and quickly turned his attention to Josie.

"I haven't seen a challenge to draw first blood in many years," he said quietly, quickly surveying Josie's physical appearance. His thoughts were louder than the other American werewolf, a sign of powerful confidence. It was clear from Ollie's thoughts that he viewed the visible healing wounds as signs that Josie killed at least a few werewolves last night.

Josie turned and grabbed his coffee, downing half the cup in spite of the bitter taste and how it burned his esophagus. Ollie's phone made a chirping sound, lighting up and vibrating all at the same time. The overall ruckus grabbed more than the pack leader's attention as several turned and stared at the thing that practically danced across the thick waistline of the werewolf before he pulled it free. Ollie ignored everyone as he answered, and his relaxed disposition hardened quickly.

Dimitri stared at Josie, and they all smelled spicy anger flowing off the American pack leader as he hissed into his cell phone.

"On my way." Ollie snapped his phone shut and looked at Larry. "That was Gus Johnson. He's got some *lunewulf* males in his restaurant who seems to be talking a bit of trash." Ollie raised an eyebrow at Josie, and half of his forehead wrinkled. "You might want to come along. Seems they are gloating over a rather nice victory over the Malta werewolves."

"I knew this would fucking happen." Dimitri kicked at the snow as he walked in between Nicolò and Josie. The American werewolves hurried out ahead of them, out of hearing distance. Dimitri glared at Josie. "Why the hell didn't you fight last night?"

Josie knew Dimitri's wrath would hit sooner or later. Privately he gave thanks the three of them were alone when it did.

"I gave my word not to use the gift."

"You let two of them live."

Josie stopped, sucking in cold air that damn near strangled his lungs before choosing his words carefully. At the moment though, pissing Dimitri off further didn't matter much to him. "You try to kill three werewolves without fighting back when they attack," he hissed.

"You're a fucking ass," Nicolò snarled, voicing Josie's thoughts as he growled at his littermate and then left him standing there, heading across the parking lot.

Snow started falling around them in lazy circular patterns. Josie ignored it and picked up the pace, following Nicolò. Dimitri was on his heels, his heavy breathing filling the cold air with the smell of fish, which didn't mix well with his anger.

"They get one blow, then you tear them apart. I didn't know I had to fucking spell it out for you in the snow."

"Nope. But it sounds like I need to spell it out for you." Josie turned, staring Dimitri in the face. Pack leader or not, he had too much fucking hostility in him to go help the Americans with the *lunewulfs*. Especially when he didn't understand what really happened. "I can't fucking fight without using the gift. Imagine being told you could fight, but you couldn't use your claws or your teeth. Think for one damned minute. The gift you curse to hell and back for being the root of all your problems would have saved me from humiliation last night. I consented to their request in order to show that Malta werewolves have honor."

Nicolo turned around, marching right back up to them and then stuffing his finger in Dimitri's face. "You better tell him right now that he fought pretty damned well under such a severe handicap."

Dimitri looked at Nicolo for a long moment, his thoughts spinning around in his head so fast that Josie backed out of his mind so he wouldn't get dizzy. Finally he looked down, appearing suddenly to be overly interested in all of their boots. "I agreed to help the American pack leader with some *lunewulfs* in his territory. If you two want to fight, save it for when we're in our own territory. Now are both of you going to walk by my side and help out here or do I go by myself?"

In a warped, very fucked-up way, Dimitri did his best to tell both of them he wanted them by his side. Josie pitied the bastard. So much hatred and anger swelled inside the werewolf that it served as a cushion for all other emotions. Be it good or bad, it prevented him from getting soft, even for one moment. He would never howl Josie's praises, not now or ever.

Josie turned away from the two littermates. "I'll meet you both over there." Heading for his car, it crossed his mind to just leave them to their task and head out into the mountains to get away from everyone's thoughts. Unfortunately, at the moment he wasn't sure he wanted to be alone with the misery swimming around in his own mind. Might be better to just go kick some ass.

Josie slid into his car, wrapping his fingers around the icy cold steering wheel and firing the engine to life.

"I remember when I first decided Renee would be my mate." The old male sitting in the passenger seat didn't have a smell to him.

"Bruno." Josie stared in disbelief at his pack leader from Malta. "How in the hell did you figure out how to return from the dead?"

The old male's face wrinkled around his eyes and mouth when he grinned. It wasn't something he remembered Bruno doing very often.

"Pretty good trick, huh?" Bruno's smile faded. "Probably wouldn't help me out much in a challenge though. You've truly mastered the gift when you can use it even after you're not supposed to."

"Are you saying I should have dishonored myself and my pack last night?" Josie shook his head slowly and then stared at his knuckles, noticing how pale they were from gripping the steering wheel.

"There's no lack of honor in accepting your feelings. And even less disgrace once you learn to show them."

Josie stared at the old male and started wondering if they were talking about the challenge or something else. Bruno sat next to him, filling the passenger seat with his large frame. His dark skin looked weathered, but not pale. If anything he glowed, as if life was very good to him. Odd that he couldn't hear any thoughts. Josie swore he sat alone in his car, hearing nothing but his own mind. Yet the werewolf next to him looked very much alive.

"When I decided I wanted Renee, I knew it was time to become pack leader. A bitch as beautiful and perfect as my mate couldn't be seen with just any rogue werewolf." Bruno looked at him, his dark eyes like glassy marbles, not revealing a damned thing. Bruno looked ahead of them and pointed as Nicolo and Dimitri left the parking lot. "He'll do a good job leading the pack. No worries there. What you need to focus on is exactly what you're doing. The time is right, and it's healthy for Malta werewolves to live like Americans do."

"Like Americans." Josie found himself automatically following Bruno's nonverbal order to follow Dimitri and Nicolo and put his car into gear.

"They see the good in others by looking inside and not at their breeding."

Josie snorted. "Some of them."

Bruno's deep chuckle sounded just like it did when Josie was still a pup. For a moment, memories of trying to master the gift and making some horrendous mistakes swarmed around in his brain. Bruno had laughed then just as he did now.

"It's good to know that you see me as you always have. You've got some good memories."

Josie frowned. Bruno could see into his mind, but not the other way around. He shoved that thought out of the way, not wanting to piss off his old pack leader and mentor with unappreciative thoughts. If Bruno picked up on it, he didn't comment.

Bruno looked out the windows as if taking in the town as they followed Nicolo and Dimitri to the restaurant. Josie straightened when the old werewolf looked at him.

"The gift offers us strength and power that many will never understand. It's a burden and it's our greatest asset." Bruno looked at him, searching Josie's face. "You followed your heart when you killed that little bitch's mate. It was a good call. Don't fuck it up now by letting your ego get in the way. You were created to fight the way that you do. When your heart speaks to you, listen. You will do just fine."

Josie figured Bruno studied him to determine if he understood Bruno's words. It was best to keep his mind as clear as possible. He would mull over the words later and figure out what the hell Bruno meant.

He pulled into the parking lot of the Eat and Greet and parked next to Dimitri and Nicolo. The two werewolves got out of their car but didn't seem to notice Bruno. Interesting.

Josie stared at Bruno, seriously wondering for a moment if his head injuries were worse than he thought. "She thinks I'm the best werewolf there is."

Bruno nodded. "Yup. And you just proved you can give her what she wants."

"You coming?" Dimitri asked, standing outside and frowning at Josie when he didn't get out of his car.

Josie glanced up at Dimitri but then returned his attention toward the passenger side of his car. There wasn't anyone there.

"I'm with you." Josie jumped out of his car, wondering what the hell Bruno meant and why he decided to choose this moment to appear in Josie's life.

The "A" in Eat and Greet was burnt out on the front of the square building. Snow blew even harder when Josie headed across the lot to the restaurant. Hostile thoughts flew around in the air almost faster than the snowflakes.

As soon as the door closed behind Josie, Dimitri and Nicolo, the restaurant got quiet. At least everyone quit talking. The noise from the ten or so werewolves' thoughts was so loud that Josie couldn't hear his own.

*The Americans are pathetic to try to ally with those Malta werewolves.*

*Which one of them was in the challenge last night? They all look the same.*

*Try to tell me those motherfuckers can't fight. Look at the size of them.*

Josie didn't even try to distinguish who was thinking what. Bruno's bizarre visit didn't leave him in the mood to deal with assholes.

"You got trouble going on here?" Dimitri intentionally ignored the three *lunewulf* males sitting at a middle table and stood with his back to them as he faced Ollie.

"American werewolves have no problem with any breed of werewolf so long as they don't bring trouble to Valle." Ollie's broad shoulders and chest were puffed out. In his huge down coat, he looked even larger than usual. "Granted, it's not too often *lunewulfs* decide to grace us with their presence. Kind of makes a werewolf want to sniff the air a bit more carefully."

"We're here to talk to you," one of the *lunewulfs* said. "If we wanted to talk to Malta werewolves, we would have gone to their pack."

"But now that we're here, you want to try to finish what you weren't able to do last night." Josie glared at Phil Wagner, the youngest of his den. The other two with him weren't familiar, but at this close of a range, Phil's thoughts were easy to pick up. The werewolf was pissed that he couldn't brag about killing a Malta werewolf today. Josie ignored everyone around him and walked up to the small male. "You had one chance to attack and kill last night. Sucks you weren't able to pull it off, because today you won't be able to."

If he pushed the *lunewulf* too far in front of his packmates, that was a real damned shame. Phil's eyes turned silver instantly and he curled his lip, showing off his growing canines.

"Like hell I won't," the little brat said, his voice garbled from his mouth changing shape.

"Take it out back," Ollie barked.

A path to the back door was quickly made as everyone inside raced from their chairs. More than likely even the employees of the restaurant left their stations and hurried to be witness to the fight. But Josie wasn't in the mood to give them a good show. He stepped into the cold air and didn't even blink when snowflakes immediately

clung to his lashes. When Phil Wagner jumped at him, Josie reached out, willing the male's neck into his hand. The sound of the *lunewulf's* neck snapping filled him with intense satisfaction.

If he held him in the air a minute longer than need be for theatrics' sake, he wouldn't admit to it later. Letting the male fall to the ground in an unceremonious heap, Josie glared at the other two *lunewulfs*.

"Next," he suggested.

Both of them froze where they were and then slowly looked around them, trying desperately not to let their fear be sniffed out. They failed miserably.

"Looks like the fight is over." Ollie turned to look at the dozen or so who stood silently, almost panting and waiting eagerly to see who might be next. "Might be a good idea to get to your dens before this weather gets nasty. It will be a good run tonight."

The conversation was hushed as the American werewolves slowly turned and headed back into the restaurant. Needless to say, the *lunewulfs* started backing away, probably hoping to get to their cars and out of American territory with their tails still intact. Josie didn't bother with their thoughts to find out. His own were attacking him too hard to pay attention to anyone else.

"Why do you associate with these Malta werewolves?" one of the *lunewulf* males asked Ollie after most of his pack was back inside. There were only Ollie and Larry, the three Malta werewolves and two *lunewulfs*. Possibly the male found those better odds. "They steal bitches and then use magic on you. Are you going to try to make me believe he simply reached out and broke Phil's neck with his sheer strength?"

"You don't get it, my friend." Ollie's soft-spoken growl gave the incredibly false impression that he wasn't mad at all. "They don't all have these powers that terrify you. And truth be smelled out, if I know of someone with a special talent, I'd put that talent to use, not forbid it. A good leader always takes advantage of all strengths around him. Maybe you should share that advice with your pack leader."

"This wasn't my fight." The other *lunewulf* male, who didn't look much over twenty, gestured to his dead packmate on the ground and then met Josie's hard stare. "But if a werewolf killed one of my den and stole his bitch, he wouldn't be breathing right now."

"When you share the good advice the American pack leader here just asked you to give to your pack leader, you might also remind him that the next time a bitch comes to him and begs to be let out of a mating because she's tired of being used as a punching bag, he might pay attention to her." Josie exhaled and the snow that melted on his cheeks seemed to cool his temper at an incredible rate. He smiled at the *lunewulf* male, smelling the young pup's confusion and hearing his thoughts as he wondered if what he'd just heard was true. "And while you're at it, let him know that Maura is incredibly happy and he's free to visit her at any time."

Just mentioning her name made him suddenly more than eager to go get his mate. Spending the rest of the day running with her in the snow sounded a hell of a lot better than dumping sand and salt over their uneven and unpaved roads. The snow would melt sooner or later on its own.



## Chapter Fifteen

Maria Anthony entered the living room from the kitchen and stopped short, wiping her hands on her long skirt. Her disapproval not only showed on her face but filled the air with a rather distasteful smell. Rosa sat next to Heidi on the couch and glanced at her mother before returning her attention to Maura.

"I agree the fighting won't bring our breeds closer together, but it's making us more aware of each other." Rosa's soft tone always sounded like whomever she spoke to mattered the most to her. That and her stunning appearance made her a bitch hard not to like. "Nothing happens overnight. But slowly we're learning more about each other. And you know how irritatingly slow males can be in smelling out the obvious. It will take a while before *lunewulfs* and Malta werewolves run together."

Maria grunted. "As long as you remember your bloodline, Rosa." The older bitch didn't look at Maura or Heidi, but focused on her daughter, giving her a hard look that was easily understood. "I'll be in my room if you need me."

Rosa sighed and studied her fingernails when her mother left them alone.

"Our breeds aren't that different. If I had any den around here I'm sure I'd be scolded about giving birth to mutts." Maura didn't mind in the least that her den consisted of one dark, and at the moment, rather mysterious werewolf. She looked out the window at the heavy snowfall and wondered where in the hell Josie was.

"They're all fine. You know that," Rosa said from the couch behind her, obviously reading her thoughts. "For some reason Josie needs to prove that he can fight. I don't get why he thinks he failed last night."

"He didn't fail." Maura turned around quickly, the small hairs on the back of her neck quickly standing at attention and making her skin crawl. "How many werewolves walk away after fighting three males? And he killed one of them."

Rosa put up her hands, grinning as she made a show of surrender. "It's okay. You don't have to convince me. I was there. Remember? He'll get over his tantrum once he sees everyone else smelled his victory."

"Why would he think he lost the fight?" Heidi frowned, glancing from one of them to the other.

Maura stared at both bitches sitting on the couch. The cold air outside seeped through the windowpane behind her, chilling her backside. Flames danced in the fireplace at the end of the room and warmed her front. The mixed sensations matched her emotions inside. Josie pulled away from her last night, showing her physical attention but staying in his fur so he wouldn't have to share his thoughts with her. She

wouldn't have only half of a male as a mate—not when the whole picture was so damned perfect.

"It's not that." Even when she frowned, Rosa was so pretty. It was disgusting, but her sweet smell made it damned hard to be jealous of her for any reason. "Probably Josie can't remember not living without the gift. It's not like that for me. Dante taught me what I know when I was a teenager, almost a grown bitch."

"What's that got to do with anything?" Maura crossed her arms, pressing against the strange sensation rising in her belly.

"He gave his word in front of the entire *lunewolf* pack." Rosa nodded toward Heidi and then looked at Maura. "He announced he wouldn't use the gift during the challenge, accepting their terms. Imagine agreeing not to fight with your claws or teeth."

"There's no reason to imagine that. He fought with honor." Whatever it was inside her, Maura noted how it twisted and made her feel a bit too warm, even though the cold still drifted in from outside. "That den didn't even have the balls to ask to draw first blood. Bob, my old pack leader, demanded it on their behalf. More than likely all he wanted was to show me that the Malta werewolf I ran with couldn't take on a few *lunewolf* males."

"Which they could do so easily, even without their claws and teeth," Heidi blurted, her own pride for her mate glowing in her eyes.

"Then I went and fucked it up further," Rosa said and frowned at her hands twisted together in her lap.

"How did you fuck anything up?" Maura asked.

"He yelled at me with his thoughts not to tell you." Rosa looked up at Maura and then stuck her chin out. "But I'm not his bitch to boss around," she said defiantly.

"Who yelled at you?" Maura asked, already guessing it was Josie.

Rosa nodded as if she'd read Maura's thoughts. Maura fought to clear her mind, deciding the only Malta werewolf she wanted browsing around in her mind was Josie.

"Josie didn't want me telling anyone that I used the gift during his fight last night." She glanced quickly at both bitches. "But no one made me promise not to use it. All I did was keep that young pain in the ass pup from being able to jump on Josie so much."

"And now he feels that it must appear he couldn't fight all three of them without help from the gift or someone else." Maura suddenly understood why Josie remained in his fur last night. She didn't like it, but he was humiliated and wouldn't face her. "Is he so damned stubborn not to see how well he did with or without the gift?"

"He's a male, isn't he?" Rosa asked.

Heidi laughed easily and continued smiling even when Maura scowled at her. "I swear they're all the same," she said. "No matter what breed they are. Their pride is thicker than their hides."

Suddenly Maura needed to be alone. Anywhere where she could let her mind ramble, sort through all of this, without having to worry about someone invading her thoughts before she understood them herself.

"I'm heading back to Josie's den," she announced, ignoring the quick looks both females gave her.

"It's your den too," Rosa pointed out.

"You're right." She shook her head. "This is still all new to me."

"I've seen claims announced after a bitch and male knew each other for an hour. We aren't human, you know. Sometimes we know to rely on our instincts when it comes to knowing what mate is for us."

"Yeah." Maura found her coat and then stood in front of the fire for a moment, getting good and warm before heading outside. "And don't either of you worry. I can sniff my way around the mountain and stay clear of any Malta werewolves between here and Josie's...I mean, *our* den."

Ignoring their pleas for her to stay at Rosa's den, and even Rosa's threats to call Josie and tell him that she'd headed out by herself, Maura reminded both of them that mated bitches had the right to run alone. And right now that was what she needed to do. She had half a mind to take advantage of the heavy falling snow and change into her fur. A good, hard run always helped her clear her mind.

Twenty minutes later, when she stood in Josie's and her small living room staring at the embers glowing in the fireplace, she still felt the urge to leave again and run up the mountain. No matter how bad the weather turned, in her fur she would be safe. But as she debated on whether to build up the fire or head back out into the storm, a cracking sound outside grabbed her attention.

The door sprung open and Josie filled the space between her and the outside. His black hair was windblown around his intense, well-chiseled expression. And the thick smell of leather from his coat mixed with his all-male scent.

Maura's heart skipped a beat and for a moment she forgot to breathe. She stared at him, not moving, as he entered the living room and closed the door behind him. The chill in the room disappeared instantly even though snowflakes flew around the floor at his feet. Suddenly it was incredibly warm as her heart remembered to beat and in fact, started pounding in her chest.

"Where have you been?" she asked, grateful suddenly that she hadn't yet taken off her heavy down coat. Her nipples hardened painfully against her sweater and sparks shot like currents from her breasts straight down to her pussy. The coat hid her body physically although she was sure he smelled her sudden arousal.

"I killed a werewolf." He was so large that the room seemed smaller all of a sudden. "The youngest of the Wagner den no longer lives."

"It's a shame the act didn't kill the demons that I still see swarming in your eyes." Even in his human form, with his eyes shaped differently than the night before, the same intensity glowed in them.

"The gift is so much a part of me that without it, I'm nothing." He wasn't making any sense. "But the gift is who I am. With it I can be everything you want."

She credited herself for not flinching when he reached for her. His fingers snaked around the side of her neck and she swore her feet slid across the floor as she moved closer to him.

"Just like this," he whispered, holding her neck as he slowly began stroking her hair with his other hand. "I pulled him to me as I'm doing with you now. I barely had to move my fingers to press against the bone that ended his life."

She felt the pressure on her neck when his fingers pushed into her flesh. Holding her breath, she didn't dare look away from his intense stare.

"You didn't need to kill him for me. I already have what I want."

His expression didn't change and from the way his eyes glowed like onyx she knew he pushed around in her thoughts, working to understand her without asking what she meant by her words.

It was a damned shame she couldn't do the same with him. *Tell me what's on your mind, wolf man.*

"I don't know what's in my mind. The gift allows me into your mind, not mine," he growled.

"You'll learn to share what is right there in your mind. I can see it. You just need to learn to put words to it."

"And what if I can't do that?"

"I think you can." She smiled, even though her lips trembled, and dared to push closer to him.

His fingers slid off her neck and moved down her back when she ran her hands up his chest and then around his neck. Pressing her body against all that hard-packed muscle made it almost impossible to think. But she fought what he did to her physically so she could show him how to control himself emotionally.

"It's like this," she whispered, and then scraped his chin with her teeth. "Open your mouth and let what is in your mind spill out."

"I needed to get back here to you as quickly as I could."

"Very good, wolf man." Her heart thumped so hard in her chest he had to be able to feel it even through her thick down coat. "Why did you need to see me?"

"You're more important than clearing away a blizzard."

God. It fucking hurt when her heart exploded in her chest. Heat swelled throughout her body as she stared up at him, her mouth so dry she couldn't utter a word.

*You're making me feel different than any other male has made me feel.*

The edge of his mouth turned up. She reached for his chin and ran her fingers over his unshaven face. He moved his head slightly and sucked her finger into his mouth.

"What is that feeling?" he asked, holding her finger between his teeth.

"Well, if it's love then I've never been in love before." Heat attacked her cheeks when she spoke so openly. "Do you think we could love each other after one day?"

"I met you months ago. And you've been on my mind more than I should admit since that first meeting."

He hadn't left her thoughts since that day when he threw Pete up in the air and then dropped him. That had been the day Heidi mated with Nicolo, and it had been the first time a werewolf stood up for her and defended her against the brutal treatment of a lousy mate. Of course he would have stayed on her mind. Josie was the only werewolf who would fight for her.

"When I ran into the mountains after Pete dropped me off on the highway, I hoped to find you again."

"And I came to you as soon as I heard your thoughts." He sucked her finger in and then out of his mouth. His hands wrapped around her neck, pushing her chin back with his thumbs and then caressing her jawbone slightly. "I believe we were meant to be mated."

"I think so too." She stared at him while working out in her mind what to say next, knowing that he followed the thought process carefully. His silence encouraged her to speak. Something told her that he needed her to voice what they were both feeling so he could digest and understand it as well. "Last night, you remained in your fur because you couldn't face me with the emotions that ripped at your insides. Am I right?"

Josie studied her face and then moved his hands to her shoulder, sliding her coat off her body so that it tumbled to the floor around her feet.

"I almost died last night." His body tightened as he spoke. "I've taken on more than three werewolves in the past and easily sent them flying, or killed them. But that was because I used the gift."

"No one is stopping you from using it now." She reached for his shoulders, then slid his coat off him like he had done to her. Strained, corded muscle twitched against her touch when she ran her palms down his arms. "The gift is part of what makes you *you*."

"But without it, I'm barely a werewolf." He let go of her and walked over to the fireplace. "You had a weasel for a mate before. And now you run to a male who probably couldn't have killed that weasel without the gift."

"I don't know about that." Heat swarmed to a dangerous level between her legs as she watched him bend over and dump several logs into the fireplace, then start a fire. "You're strong enough to seek me out. And a rogue werewolf, willing to demand a mating from three pack leaders in one day, is a pretty fucking strong werewolf, if you ask me."

Josie chuckled, squatting before the fire and playing with it while flames danced before him. The light danced off his shiny black hair and accentuated the broadness of his shoulders and powerful outline of his torso. Any bitch would be dancing with

delight, howling proudly to all who would listen if a werewolf like him fought for her, then demanded their mating be allowed to the leaders of three different packs.

Maura had her work cut out for her. Josie didn't have a clue how to express his emotions. The gift consumed him and allowed him to control all around him without having to share anything that was inside him. It would take time and effort on his part to open up the inside of him, the side of him that was vulnerable and unprotected by his intense and special powers.

The fire quickly warmed the small living room, but she didn't need the flames to feel the heat. Just staring at him, realizing in her heart the kind of werewolf who she now had to call her own, got her so fucking hot inside she could have danced in her flesh in the snow and not felt the cold.

Josie stood, turning around and loosening his shirt at the same time. "You can dance in the snow in a bit," he told her.

"Oh." She flushed. There wasn't any stopping the direction of her thoughts, especially when he peeled off his shirt and so much bulging muscle filled her gaze.

His dark skin glistened with moisture, either dampness from the snow or from sweat, she couldn't tell from his scent. All she smelled was the thick urgency of his desire. And when he moved to the couch, reaching for his boots, her legs trembled as that same lust attacked her with a vengeance.

"Don't get accustomed to this because it's not something that I'll be able to do that often, but you've made me happier than I've been in my entire life." He didn't look at her but spoke to his boots as he pulled them from his feet. "You accept me as I am, which no other bitch has come close to doing. And you're more beautiful and loving than I deserve."

Maura fell to her knees, her legs simply no longer able to hold her. She wrapped her fingers around his legs, pulling herself closer to him, then reached up and cupped his face.

"Josie," she whispered, slowly shaking her head in disbelief that he'd just opened up to her like this. "I could get real accustomed to you talking to me like that."

"Figures." He looked up at her with a half-smile that melted her heart. "I've never spent much time sharing my mind with someone else."

"I know it's just as perfect as the rest of you." Muscles twitched against her fingers as she ran her hands up his thighs.

Josie sucked in a breath, his gaze hooded by long, thick black lashes as he watched her with a possessive predator's stare. It made her heart flip-flop. The hairs on the back of her neck stood at attention, and her own urge to possess, to claim every inch of him again and again made the animal side of her surface.

"You may not have shared your personal feelings with another bitch before. But to be honest, that flatters me. I will be your first." She tried to sound encouraging, but her urge to mate with him made her voice sound raspier than usual. "And I'll be your only."

"You would fight for me?" He sounded amused.

She reached for his hair and pulled hard enough that his expression sobered and he raised one eyebrow.

"To the death," she hissed. "I feel it." She kept her fingers twisted in his hair but moved her other hand to her chest. "In here. And the call to mate with you whenever you're near me arouses my desire to change. No male has ever done that to me before. We're truly mated, for life."

"Where do you feel it?" He ignored how she held his hair and put his hand over her hand, except he conveniently found a nipple and twisted it. "I think I feel it too."

Silver shot through his dark eyes and his smooth hair in her fingers suddenly felt coarser than it had a moment before. "Take my jeans off me, little bitch, before I tear them from my body."

She released his hair and reached for the top button on his jeans. Her knuckles pressed against his hard stomach as she struggled to undo the button and then pull down his zipper. His breath caught in his throat and sounded rougher as he watched her undress him, not saying a word.

When she had his jeans unzipped, Josie stood, leaving her on her knees. She tugged at his jeans, looking up at him as she did so. His black hair fell around his face. The cut on his throat and several deep scratches on his chest somehow made him look more dangerous at the moment. Yet there was no fear, no hesitation. Josie was her werewolf in spite of their different breeds, in spite of the fact that they came from different packs. For whatever reason, it was meant for the two of them to run together, build their den together and fight by each other's side. Maybe that was why up until this moment neither of them had truly been happy.

Maura knew it, especially from his confession that he didn't share his emotions well. A werewolf only opened up his true inner self to his mate. Otherwise, he ran with a pack, supported and fought for that pack but stood alone and tall – being a true alpha male.

She pulled his jeans down his legs and he stepped out of them so that he stood naked in front of her. His long, thick cock stuck out, almost touching her forehead. She straightened so that she could kiss the tip of it, and a salty, wonderful taste filled her mouth.

"Little bitch," Josie growled and then reached for her. "Get out of your clothes."

"Sounds real good to me." She tried laughing but her heart beat too fast and hard for her to catch her breath.

He pulled her to her feet, then reached for her clothes, pulling them off her so quickly and easy she knew the gift had to be at play. When she stood naked before him, her creamy white skin contrasting with his dark body, she tried walking into him. More than anything she wanted to feel all of that hard-packed muscle pressing against her from head to toe.

"We'll consummate our mating today," he informed her, sounding so serious she tore her attention from ripped muscle to look up into his face. The cut on his throat puckered where the flesh met and had already started healing. She looked past it to his eyes, noticing another scratch running down his cheekbone. "You said you wanted to run in the snow."

"Are you sure you want to run?" she asked, reaching for the cut on his neck to inspect it further.

Josie grabbed her hand and brought it to his mouth. His teeth scraped over her flesh and shivers raced through her.

"Change," he ordered, making the one word sound more like a growl.

Already his body began transforming. He turned, still holding her hand, and headed toward his front door.

Interesting how her body responded to him without her giving it any thought. Blood rushed in her veins, flowing too quickly for her human heart to handle. The sweet pain spread over her body. Muscles and bones grew and changed. Thick white hair popped through her skin, covering her body.

When Josie opened the door to his den and the harsh wind wrapped around them, Maura felt anything but cold. Invigorated, excited, the winter storm called to her, whispering in her ears to run and take on the elements.

As her body changed form and her spine altered, making it hard to stand on two legs comfortably, she dropped to all four. The first thing she saw and smelled was Josie's large cock, looking thick and swollen as it hung low between his hind legs. All his long, thick, black fur didn't hide it. Maura's mouth watered and her pussy swelled, while the fur inside her back legs grew damp.

Even though her human ability to think through a situation still existed, her animal instinct was now stronger. It called out to her to run, to make this male by her side prove his worthiness.

Maura barked her challenge to him, laughing as amazing energy filled her, making her almost lightheaded. She leapt past him, and was momentarily blinded by the amount of snow falling. The cold didn't bother her though, and this sure as hell wasn't her first blizzard. Leaping over the growing drifts that were deeper around the den, she headed up the mountain.

Blood pumped hard and fast through her body and she panted greedily at the cold air. Josie's deep barks behind her gave her even more energy.

*Catch me if you can, wolf man.*

The ground shook right behind her as he pounded the earth with his large paws, proving to her without her having to turn around that he intended to do just that.

Maura raced around trees and large rocks, grinning from ear to ear when large snowflakes landed on her face and body, soaking her flesh and keeping her cool as her



heart pounded against her rib cage. At the top of a cliff, she dared turn and then bared her teeth, growling with delight when he was just a few feet behind her.

And so damned large and magnificent-looking. His black fur shone against the glistening white snow falling around them and building at their paws. There was a steep drop just in front of her and her choices were simple. Submit or jump. Josie wagged his tail with slow confidence, parting his lips and showing off incredibly dangerous-looking fangs as his eyes glowed.

Just the sight of him stole her breath away.

*I can't believe you're all mine.* She forgot all about running when he circled around her, sniffing and nipping at her. His scent took over all other smells around them. But when he went up on his hind legs, clawing at the air with his front paws just as a horse would do when excited, the overwhelming aroma of his lust attacked her like a powerful drug.

Maura staggered in the deep snow, trying to step to the side so that he wouldn't trample her, but she was too close to the cliff. She panicked when the ground gave way underneath her, but then something very weird happened.

For a moment she swore they were flying. Josie came down on top of her, stealing her white world away from her and replacing it with nothing but black fur. When she felt the ground underneath her paws again, it didn't come up at her with a hard impact like it should have if they'd just fallen off the side of the cliff.

And it took a moment for her to see that was exactly what they had done. Except that Josie managed to slow their fall. Using his gift, he ensured that they landed softly, easily on the ground below.

Now protected by a wall of earth, with thick bushes and trees around them, the falling snow blanketed their surroundings. All she smelled was the two of them. And in their secluded little spot, it might as well just be just her and Josie and no one else. It was as if with that fall off the cliff they'd created a world where only they existed. And the heavy snow blowing around them made it so there were no other sounds or scents to distract them from each other.

Josie moved behind her, mounting her easily since she was so much smaller than he in her fur. When his hard cock found its way under her tail and then pressed at her already soaked entrance, for a moment she wondered if he were too big. Heidi never mentioned to her that Malta werewolves weren't compatible with *lunewulf* bitches. And if it were true, certainly she would have said something.

Josie didn't seem too worried about it either. His calm, controlled, possessive scent filled her nostrils. There was only one thing on his mind. In their fur, he was very easy to read. And he wasn't thinking that he would hurt her.

Nonetheless, when his cock began gliding into her soaked pussy, sparks shot before her eyes and she swore for a moment he split her in two. She yelped, instinctively trying to shift to the side and prevent him from moving deeper inside her. Josie nipped at her fur, grabbing hold of her at her shoulder blades. The quick pain from his mouth

was stronger in the end than any pain elsewhere. In fact, after that first moment, there was no pain. Just a swelling pressure that grew continuously as he continued his trek deeper and deeper inside her.

*Dear Lord!*

How big was he?

When she was sure beyond any doubt that his cock filled her clear up to her stomach, the pressure ebbed, but held its place as he slowly began moving inside her. Never in her life had she felt so filled up, so completely stretched out. But it didn't hurt. In fact, when he let go of her with his mouth and pressed his head against hers, she fought to keep standing just so she could enjoy the full pleasure of being fucked by a cock so incredibly large.

His hindquarters moved back and forth harder, building momentum until he fucked her with so much energy that she fell to the side. Yelping as a sharp stinging sensation swiped over her, she managed to glance down and see his thick, long, black cock pull out of her almost completely. Soaked from her come, it quickly impaled her again, disappearing inside her and building even more pressure and swelling.

Josie held himself up with his front legs, keeping his weight off her while locking himself deep in her pussy and continuing to thrust with even more energy. He would fuck her until she couldn't walk. She was sure of it. Moving faster and faster, his hindquarters shaking while he rode her with that huge cock, watching became a blur. All she could do was experience the sensations that ripped her apart. Yet there was no pain. Just the incredible growing heat and swelling that would take her over the edge.

And that was what it felt like. For a moment she swore she fell again. Something broke inside her, like a racing mountain stream clogged and suddenly set free to roar to life and release all its moisture. Her dam broke, her orgasm attacking and breaking the pressure.

*Holy fucking shit!* Maura howled, her entire body stiffening. She wouldn't have believed her smaller body could control his much larger frame. But when she came she stared up at him through blurred vision and saw him howl. The muscles inside her pussy clamped down on his large cock, preventing his movement and squeezing hard enough that he, too, screamed. And then he filled her with his come. Gushes of hot liquid filled her, searing her alive. She quivered, watching the intense look on his face as his body shook and convulsed. He released everything he had to give her until slowly he quit moving.

For a long moment he stared down at her, panting quietly while snow fell around them. Everything seemed so peaceful. Their worlds were now one. No matter the warring that might continue between their breeds. None of that mattered anymore.

Maura lost herself in those almond-shaped eyes and adored his beauty as a werewolf.

*I love you, wolf man. And I know I've never loved another before the way I do you right now.*

Josie stared down at her, his mouth parting into a big, toothy grin. *I love you too, Maura.* There was no doubt in her mind. She heard his thoughts clearly in her head.

## About the Author

All my life, I've wondered at how people fall into the routines of life. The paths we travel seemed to be well-trodden by society. We go to school, fall in love, find a line of work (and hope and pray it is one we like), have children and do our best to mold them into good people who will travel the same path. This is the path so commonly referred to as the "real world".

The characters in my books are destined to stray down a different path other than the one society suggests. Each story leads the reader into a world altered slightly from the one they know. For me, this is what good fiction is about, an opportunity to escape from the daily grind and wander down someone else's path.

Lorie O'Clare lives in Kansas with her three sons.

Lorie welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

### *Tell Us What You Think*

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at [Comments@EllorasCave.com](mailto:Comments@EllorasCave.com).

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