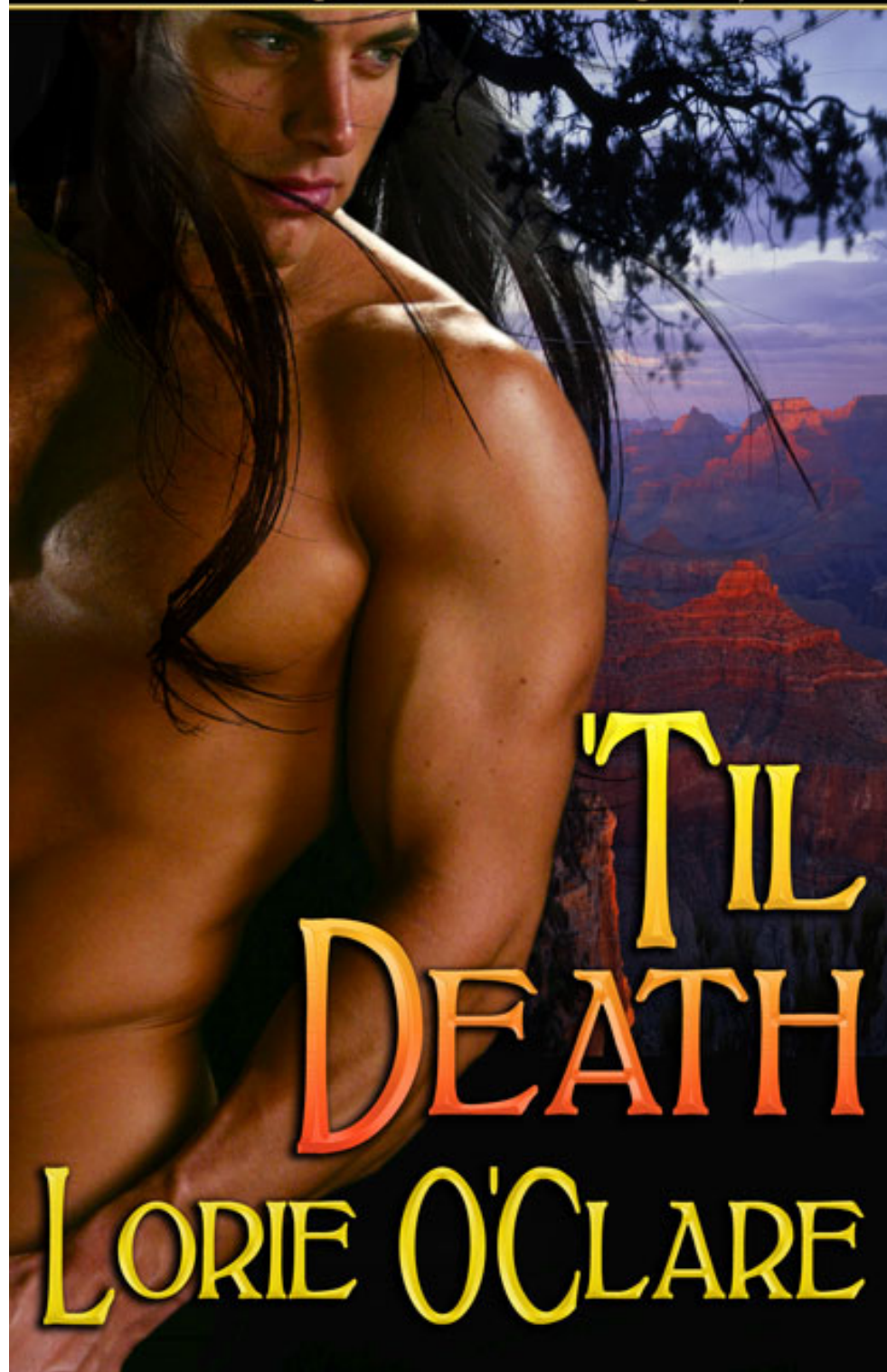


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

'Til Death

ISBN 9781419913327

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

'Til Death Copyright © 2007 Lorie O'Clare

Edited by Mary Altman.

Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication: August 2007

This book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

WEREWOLVES OF MALTA:

'TIL DEATH

Lorie O'Clare

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

eBay: eBay Inc.

Chapter One

The cold night air lay heavy with moisture over her long black coat. The smells of the night were everywhere, as well as an air of excitement, giving the world around Rosa Anthony a crisp, charged feeling.

Anything could happen tonight.

God. She wished something *would* happen tonight.

She and her pack members reached the cliff and stared at the rushing creek that swelled with roaring water from melting snow. Spring would be here soon.

A full moon made the water sparkle like it was loaded with diamonds. Even from here Rosa smelled the fish lazily moving around deep in the water, unaware of the deadly predators watching them.

Moira Aldo pushed up against Rosa. *Race you to the water*, she challenged with her mind, thinking to her the same way others in her pack would speak.

Moira's mate, Dante Aldo, brushed against Moira and pushed her closer to Rosa. He looked down at both of them, his silver, almond-shaped eyes glowing in the night. *You bitches can follow me if you can keep up*, he taunted, his long, red tongue hanging from the side of his mouth as he laughed at them.

Like I would want to stare at your ass. Rosa tossed her head, breathing in the rich smell of evergreen and the muskier, more pungent scent of the other males around her.

One male in particular dominated. And he didn't overhear their telepathic conversation.

Rosa moved away from Moira and Dante, edging closer to the cliff so she could get a better look at Dimitri. Their pack leader, Dimitri Spalto, stood at the edge of the group, holding his head high and surveying the rushing water below them, ignoring everyone around him. Or at least that was how he appeared. Even though he didn't have the gift, Rosa doubted Dimitri missed much that happened around him.

It wasn't too hard focusing on his thoughts. They were a small group, just the members of her pack who wound up agreeing on a late night run after leaving Perry and Claudette Zammit's den. The young couple had opened their den up for a party, with cards and beer and just some really good downtime. Too many in the pack needed that after being shut up in their dens with the cold winter. Rosa wasn't the only member of this pack not accustomed to the harsh cold and snow in the Rocky Mountains.

Racing in their fur up the mountain to the stream that tumbled over the rocks, creating mini-waterfalls, made for the perfect end to an enjoyable evening. Although things could still get a lot better. Realizing she was almost drooling staring at Dimitri, she closed her mouth, feeling her long incisors pinch against her lower jaw.

Lowering her head, she made a show of sniffing the edge of the cliff. Good thing Dante and Moira were more wrapped up in each other than anyone else. And Josie Balzon, who was so captivated with his brand new *lunewulf* mate, probably didn't care what thoughts meandered around in her brain. The others with them didn't possess the gift, the wonderful blessing bestowed upon Malta werewolves that allowed them to use the elements to their advantage—and to traipse around in each others' minds.

Like I want to hear any of them tease me just because I know perfection when I see it, Rosa thought to herself, inhaling the wet earth under her paws. It didn't drown out Dimitri's rich male scent. Or the growing smell of her lust.

Although sex was on almost everyone's mind this far into the run.

Dimitri's warning growl almost made her jump, then sent shivers over her hide when she imagined him making that same sound as he pumped deep inside her. Leaping first, the giant werewolf bounded down the cliff toward the rushing water below. Everyone else followed eagerly.

Rocks pinched the pads under her paws as she hurried over the incline until she reached the water. For a few moments, its fresh smell—and that of the fish lingering deep in its depths—distracted her and the urge to hunt came on strong. Moira and Dante, as well as Dante's littermate Juan and Juan's mate Erin, bounded into the water, barking like cubs and splashing freezing water everywhere. The droplets soaking her fur felt real good after the hard run.

As appealing as diving for fresh fish sounded, Rosa would rather hunt something else. She turned and caught Dimitri standing alongside the bank, taking long, slow drinks of the fresh spring water. Thick, roped muscle strained over his shoulders and large chest. His shiny black coat reflected moonlight and fell almost to the ground. He was a large, deadly looking werewolf, and the coat on her inner thighs grew damp watching him. And it wasn't from the stream.

Rosa walked toward him, climbing into his mind.

At the same time, Tonya Miccatto, the lousy slut, made her move and pranced up to him. Rosa fought to swallow the growl that almost escaped her. She had no claim on Dimitri. Yet.

Tonya wagged her tail and brushed up against him, practically turning around and begging him to mount her right there in front of all of them. Rosa didn't know whether to puke or attack. Maybe she would kick the bitch's ass and then throw up.

Come on, wolf man. You know I could make you howl. Tonya's thoughts would even be obvious to someone who didn't have the gift.

You never quit, do you, little bitch? Dimitri wasn't quite sober and his thoughts were a little blurred. Even so, it was quite clear he wasn't interested in the tramp.

A werewolf like you needs a way to burn energy. Tonya brushed her body against his and then reached up and nipped the side of his face.

Dimitri growled. *Is there something you want?*

Oh hell. Rosa would not stand there and watch him flirt back with her.

Ignoring the icy water that soaked her coat up her legs, Rosa marched over to Dimitri and Tonya, lowering her head so that she almost drank from the stream. She only had a couple beers earlier, but maybe they were enough to loosen her up. Her growl rose in her throat and grabbed Tonya's attention. Dimitri turned his head and pierced her with glowing silver eyes.

Leave him the fuck alone. She figured one solid warning was enough.

Tonya opened her mouth, showing off long, white, shiny teeth as she panted and laughed at Rosa. The bitch rubbed her smaller body alongside Dimitri's massive frame. It would take a good roll in the freezing stream to get her stench off his coat. Rosa lunged forward, splashing water on all of them, and bit Tonya on the chest.

The bitch jumped backward, yelping. But she recovered quickly from her shock. Obviously being told no didn't happen too often. Well she would be told no around Dimitri. Rosa would see to it.

His mark isn't on you, Rosa. Back off. He's mine tonight. Tell you what. I'll give you sloppy seconds. Tonya barked excitedly and pushed into Dimitri.

Dimitri didn't move, and the lousy bitch rubbed herself against him. Rosa took several large steps, almost jumping through the water to go at Tonya again.

Let me make things a bit clearer for you. Rosa snapped at her again.

When Tonya fell backward into the water, Dimitri turned his attention to Rosa. She lost her ability to breathe when he stared down at her.

Would you fight for me, little bitch? There was no amusement or flattery in his thoughts.

And that stung.

Hell yes she would fight for him. And he damned well knew she was interested. Ever since she and her mother joined this pack a few months ago, Rosa did everything in her power to see Dimitri as often as possible. The werewolf preoccupied her dreams and distracted her during the day. One whiff of his scent and it was impossible for her to focus on any task she was trying to do.

She straightened, meeting his gaze.

You are too damned beautiful. What is it about you, Rosa?

Rosa forgot to breathe. Simply gawking at him, she wondered if she heard his thoughts right. When she ran her tongue over the fur covering her teeth, his gaze shifted. Thick muscles twitched in his deep barrel chest. The tips of his coat clung together, soaked from the water, when he took a step toward her.

The water could have been frozen solid and she wouldn't have noticed. She didn't dare move, heat rising inside her to dangerous levels when he sniffed her face with his cool, black nose. His thick, ripe scent wrapped around her like a drug, intoxicating her with lust.

And then Tonya ruined the moment when she splashed up next to them. *Ignore her, Dimitri. She won't put out. I will. You know that's what you want. Do you really think she would lift her tail after a hard run? Her den wouldn't let her.*

Damn the fucking little bitch for her thoughts. Obviously they alerted Dante, who suddenly sauntered over to Rosa with his mate by his side. Glaring at Dimitri, he pushed between the two of them, forcing Rosa to stumble backward.

Tonya barked her delight at no longer having competition and began nipping at Dimitri again.

Don't you have something better to do? Rosa scowled at Dante, raising her upper lip and growling.

Not when it comes to protecting your reputation. I think it's time we headed back.

Dante was her cousin, not her fucking mother. And she told him as much with her thoughts. Besides, being with their pack leader, even though he was an unattached male, would hardly ruin her reputation. Not when she didn't plan on it being a one-time thing.

Tonya's excited yelps annoyed Rosa even further. With Dante's large black frame blocking her view, she couldn't tell what the bitch was doing with Dimitri, and that made her blood boil.

She raced to the shore, putting distance between her and all of them. Fortunately, most of her pack was preoccupied with pouncing on fish and playing with each other. None of them cared what she did other than her overprotective cousin.

Dante moved enough to give her a view of Dimitri. He still stood in the water, sniffing it and scooping out the fish, although most of the school that had been there when they arrived had managed to swim upstream and away from the deadly predators.

The little black bitch pranced around Dimitri and then stopped in front of him, this time raising her tail in invitation and practically backing into him. Tonya needed to be shown what kind of fire she played with.

Rosa saw all she could handle seeing. This time she didn't bark her annoyance. And the water was shallow enough, barely coming halfway up her legs, that it didn't slow her pace. She plowed into Tonya, knocking the bitch off all her paws and sending her tumbling head over heels. The water splashed fiercely around them and Tonya came up all teeth and claws.

Bring it on, stupid bitch, Rosa growled.

He's not your fucking werewolf, Tonya barked furiously. Her almond-shaped eyes became narrow slits, with bright silver gleaming. Anger filled the air with its spicy scent as she lunged at Rosa. The impact sent Tonya sideways, sliding over the stream as if she suddenly decided to go belly surfing.

You want a challenge? I'll take you on right now. Whatever it takes to make you keep your nasty paws off him. Rosa was pissed.

Dimitri didn't like Tonya. Rosa knew he didn't. But if the bitch needed an education on who she could flirt with and who she couldn't, Rosa had no problem giving it to her.

She leapt into the air, opening her mouth wide enough to clamp down on Tonya's neck. Fury tore her insides apart. Dimitri was an honorable werewolf, their pack leader and way too fucking gorgeous for some tramp to think she stood a chance with him.

Rosa clamped her jaw shut, feeling fur and flesh fill her mouth. Her teeth pressed into Tonya's hide, ready to puncture and taste blood.

She went flying to the side, tumbling over her legs before any thoughts registered in her mind.

There will not be a challenge over me! Dimitri barked furiously enough to grab everyone's attention. Standing in front of Rosa as she pulled herself out of the frigid water and shook the droplets from her coat, Dimitri lowered his head and growled low and angrily at the drenched bitch. Tonya looked like a dirty mop that needed rung out.

Tonya backed up a few paces. Dimitri leapt at her, roaring his order for her to back off. Tonya tripped over her tail trying to get away from him.

Like I need this shit right now. Dimitri was pissed.

The werewolves, who a second ago laughed jovially in the water, now all stood silently watching their pack leader and the two bitches who were now on either side of him. Rosa didn't move. When Tonya walked away from him, deciding to lick her bruised ego, Dimitri turned around slowly and gave her his attention.

I take one step toward her and her littermates will come after me. Doesn't the little bitch know there is no love lost between me and her den? Dimitri studied her, not moving, while he tried to figure out her actions.

Sometimes werewolves could be so dense.

None of her den will lay a paw on you. They are all bark and no bite. Josie Balzon, a very large werewolf who had grown up with Dimitri and ached for a reason to take on Dante, sauntered over to his pack leader like he owned the stream. His *lunewulf* mate moved quietly behind him, watching the other werewolves around her warily.

Stay out of it, Josie. She knew he could hear her thoughts. *No one is going to fight anyone tonight. Especially over me. Just leave me alone.*

Josie looked past Dimitri at her, hearing her but not commenting, and then turned his attention to Dante.

I've got better things to do tonight than toss your lame ass around. Dante curled his upper lip at Josie and then intentionally turned his back on him, focusing on his mate as he pushed her toward the shore.

Rosa ached for something better to do too. She returned her attention to Dimitri, who ignored his pack as they moved to shore and continued watching her. When she finally dared to step closer to him, he turned and broke into a trot, barking at his pack members to head back down the mountain.

Galloping down the steep incline, leaping over boulders and running around groups of evergreens helped clear her head a little. Halfway down the mountain, Tonya fell into pace alongside Dimitri. Damn the little bitch for still having hopes of getting laid tonight.

For all Rosa cared, the bitch could go fuck half the pack. But she wouldn't get any from Dimitri. No matter what her busybody packmates and littermates thought on the subject. Rosa would have Dimitri. Tonya, and any other bitch who was brave enough to come sniffing around, would learn quickly that they were out of their league.

She would fight for him, accept any challenge if need be, and to hell with the overbearing males in her life.

When they slowed as they came to an extremely rocky part of the mountain that was still covered with a fair amount of snow and ice, Tonya faked falling into Dimitri. Like anyone would believe she slipped on the ice.

He stopped, waiting but not helping as she pulled herself to her paws. She grinned a toothy grin at him, getting off her ass but then sitting before him and then scooting closer until she almost was underneath his large chest.

Most of the others ran ahead, eager to return to their dens and get laid before sunrise. Rosa stopped, knowing her outrage filled the air with a spicy scent. The fucking slut had her seeing red. Tonya dared to roll over, spreading her legs and panting with excitement as she stared up at Dimitri.

Rosa leapt, not thinking, which prevented Dante and the others from hearing her plan out her next move in her head. She pounced on Tonya, who lay right in front of Dimitri. Rosa's quick actions forced her to stumble backward, stopped only by his steel body.

Tonya screamed, getting the full impact of Rosa's extended claws. And she possibly could have been ripped wide open except she did slide on the ice then, gliding a few feet out from underneath Rosa.

What kind of warning do you need? Rosa let out a rumbling growl, so furious that for a moment she didn't feel the heat from the thick fur that pressed against her backside. *Stay the hell away from him or you'll regret ever sniffing out his scent.*

Tonya slipped again before finding her footing and then shook her coat furiously. Long black fur fanned around her, making the bitch look like she was puffed up like a porcupine.

You might have to fight this bad for a hard cock, but I sure as hell don't. Just wait, bitch. When you aren't around, I'm going to enjoy the hell out of what Dimitri has to offer. A werewolf like him wants a good roll outside the pack, not some prissy little female like you who would simply offer him your kill and make him listen to your overbearing mother while eating it. Tonya tossed her head, hastily barking her final threat, and then bounded down the mountain to catch up with the rest of the pack.

Rosa shook with anger. And then noticed she was pressed up against Dimitri. Stepping gingerly over uneven, slick ground, she created some distance. It was hard to

see around his massive body, but she glanced around her to see who else witnessed her tirade. Although she didn't see him, she smelled Dante's presence. His thoughts didn't press into her. Good thing too. He wouldn't give her a moment alone with Dimitri. But she would take the one free moment while she had it.

She looked up into his fierce expression.

You really would fight for me. Dimitri's thoughts sounded baffled.

Damned straight I would, she told him, even though Dimitri couldn't hear her thoughts.

She found her own footing, although she noted he didn't push her to stand on her own. Dimitri simply stared down at her, sniffing the air and pulling in her scent. Although he must have filled his lungs with her spicy anger, she doubted he missed the overwhelming aroma of her need and lust.

He opened his mouth slowly, showing off long, deadly incisors as he continued watching her. Rosa's heart stopped beating. His coat was tousled, tangled in long strands from the run and clumped and damp from the water. She wanted more than anything to take her time licking him, brushing out his hair with her tongue until he stood with the majestic air that she so often saw him display.

If I even thought about fucking you, your den with their blasted gift would be on my ass so quickly. You would be so damned worth it, but it would just be more bullshit I would have to deal with. His thoughts meandered around the possibilities of taking her, and she didn't dare move while she listened.

Trust me, wolf man. No one will stop me from being with you. Rosa dared to move slightly and then slowly ran her tongue down the length of his muscular shoulder. He tasted as good as he smelled. And the musky aroma of lust didn't come from just her.

Chapter Two

Dimitri didn't care how much aggravation he smelled around him. If he did his job right, no other pack leader would ever have it as hard as he did. Paving the way for an easier life for Malta werewolves mattered more than making friends at this point.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me that your den filled with water?" He glared at Ben Miccatto.

"It didn't happen until this morning." Tonya Miccatto didn't have any makeup on today and the ripe smell of sex clung to her. Obviously she found a willing partner somewhere after their run last night. She stepped gingerly over the sopping wet carpet on their living room floor. "Do you think I would live like this? The second my den flooded, my sire called you."

The little slut had a mouth on her that would annoy a saint. Dimitri was no saint.

"Silence your daughter," he growled at Ben.

The old werewolf gave his daughter a harsh look. She crossed her arms over her chest, smashing her breasts together and showing off way too much cleavage in the low-cut shirt she wore.

"We woke up to this," Ben explained. He sighed, looking around. "My guess is the melting snow caused it."

"If that were the case, then the dens around you would be complaining too. And they aren't." As soon as he saw how much water filled their den, Dimitri woke up the neighbors. No one had water damage. He ran his hand over his unbrushed hair. It was too damned early and he needed coffee. "I'll see who is available to help clean up this mess. I suggest you put anything that matters to you up so it doesn't get wet."

"The floor matters to me," Tonya snapped, ignoring her sire when he growled at her. "And I know why this happened as much as you do, Dimitri." She dared to move closer and put her cold palm on his chest. "I think someone is jealous," she whispered, batting her eyelashes at him like they were friends.

"No one has any reason to be jealous about anything," Dimitri barked, and walked away from her. "Is this the only room with water damage?"

"So far." Ben sounded tired. "You can see how it's running down from the hill out back though. If you do find some volunteers, we could probably create a dam of sorts to divert the melting snow."

He led the way through his den and out the back kitchen door. Dimitri squinted against the morning sun. He didn't sleep well after the run last night. Of course, being pack leader, there was never a guarantee of sleeping in. There were days when he

craved remaining on his pillow until he couldn't sleep another wink. That wasn't an option, nor would it be as long as he lived.

He crunched over the snow, walking into the trees and then staring at the undeveloped mountainside beyond the Miccatto's den. "Let me see who I can round up. The pack should be waking up about now." Again he scrubbed his head with his hand. A hot shower sounded damned good. Breakfast...coffee...then take on the problems of the day. "I'll round up a couple bitches to help your daughter clean up inside too."

Ben Miccatto patted Dimitri on the back. "I appreciate it. And she does too. My daughter isn't really a bad bitch."

Dimitri didn't feel sorry for the old werewolf. His offspring was a tramp. Everyone knew it—well, except Ben. The werewolf would sniff the other way when it came to Tonya, no matter how obvious the truth smelled. That wasn't Dimitri's problem. His problem was the melting snow that seemed to create rivers flowing only toward this den as he watched. And even this mess wasn't his problem. There was only one way the snow had created quickly flowing paths, bypassing all other cabins and focusing only on this den. Someone with the gift helped it along. Someone who had it out for one of the werewolves in this den. Dimitri knew exactly whose problem this was.

"I'll call you soon." Dimitri clasped the hand that touched him, feeling Miccatto's old, rough skin. For the werewolf's sake, Dimitri wished someone would mate with Miccatto's daughter, just so he could force the werewolf to take her before her sire died.

What was he thinking? Half the pack had probably taken her by now.

Dimitri didn't bother going back inside the den. He trudged through the snow, which was still deep in the shade on the side of the cabin, and headed toward his truck. Hopping inside, he stared down the road, then at the other dens lining this side.

There wouldn't be many days when he would say he agreed with Tonya. But the bitch was right. Snow melted all over the mountain. For the most part, it ran into the existing rivers and streams, improving fishing. Fishing kicked ass, and he might have enjoyed diving for a few trout last night. That is, if Tonya and Rosa hadn't tried killing each other over him. There were some quirks to being pack leader, one of them being all of a sudden apparently he was stud material. He didn't remember one time in his past where two bitches went at it like those two did last night—and over him.

He should be flattered. Maybe he was a bit. But not for the reasons some might think. There wasn't any reason to get excited over Tonya—she came on to half the pack. And her intentions were clear. *Fuck me and then take your tail home.* In a different world she possibly would be a good bitch to know. But being pack leader meant he held the responsibility of displaying what honor was all about.

And Rosa—shit. God only knew why that bitch sniffed after him. And being flattered was putting it mildly. Rosa was beyond any doubt the hottest bitch he'd ever laid eyes on. Her scent was perfect, rich and sensual. Ever since she and her mother settled into this pack, she'd flirted with him. And Rosa was no Tonya. He never noticed

her sniffing after any other male. Every single male in the pack sniffed after Rosa. Not that he saw them doing it. Whenever Rosa was around him, her entire focus centered on him. Rosa glowed with her beauty. And her sexuality smelled better than anything he'd ever sniffed out. He wasn't the only one who noticed it. Who wouldn't run after her? Well, other than him.

He wouldn't even allow the list of reasons why he needed to stay away from that bitch into his head. Not when he planned on visiting her next.

Sucked that breakfast would have to wait.

Unless, of course, Rosa happened to have it ready and on the table. It would serve her right if he invaded her space for a change.

Rosa Anthony had some answering to do. It smelled like the bitch had used her gift, taking out her anger toward Tonya by soaking the tramp's den. If it weren't for old Ben Miccatto, Dimitri might let the bitches fight it out.

He pulled out of the drive, squinting as the sun reflected off white, glistening snow. Reaching for his sunglasses, a memory of the sea, also just as blinding, turned his mood from grouchy to downright irritable.

A beautiful, endless green sea first thing in the afternoon, with the pungent smell of humans, salt water and fish mixed with spices often put his world in better balance. Dimitri saw himself standing there, his littermates around him, watching while his sire conducted business with the fishermen. His mother always walked by her mate's side, defending him no matter what the situation. There was never a more loyal and beautiful bitch.

"Shove it out of your head, man." The last thing he needed was for Rosa to pick up on his thoughts of Malta. "The island is dead to you."

As were all the memories that went with it.

Dimitri turned off the one-lane road and headed across the mountain. The den he needed to visit now was almost at the bottom of the mountain. His pack had grown incredibly in the short time they'd been here. It would be a year soon.

He hit a bump and his head brushed the roof of his truck. "And if we ever get any fucking funding, someday we'll have decent roads."

Maneuvering the truck over the ice and around rivers of melting snow, he took his eyes off the road long enough to take in the dens on either side of him. Most of them he helped build. Sturdy cabins that endured their first winter on the mountain.

"Think about that," he ordered his mind, and gripped the steering wheel harder. It would be a hell of a lot smarter to simply call the bitch instead of risking her climbing into his mind the moment she saw him.

God. He hated the fucking gift.

"Hate is such a strong smell." The old werewolf suddenly sitting in the passenger side of Dimitri's truck growled at him.

Dimitri almost drove the truck off the road. "Fuck me," he hissed, decelerating so he wouldn't slide and managing to straighten the vehicle back out. "Bruno!"

"You keep showing up smelling like you despise everything and Rosa will think that is your natural scent."

"Like I care what she thinks."

"You care, son. I can smell how much you care."

"Thanks for the reminder that my sense of smell will fade with old age." Dimitri heaved a sigh, scowling at the view in front of him and taking the sharp turn that led down the mountain. The werewolf sitting next to him was probably the only male on the planet he could humble himself before. "Forgive me. I'm out of line."

"Don't think I can't still kick your ass." Bruno didn't hold on to the handle when the truck bounced over the rough road. He sat relaxed, his thick, arthritic fingers stretched out over his thighs. "I've got a job for you. It's not a suggestion, but something you will do."

"What's that?"

"Make the gift work for you."

"What the hell?" Dimitri glanced at Bruno, but the old werewolf wasn't there. "What the fuck does that mean?" he yelled to himself.

No one else was in the cab with him.

Bruno Tangaree, his pack leader from Malta, appeared to him a lot lately. His truck slid on the road and he pumped the brakes slowly, managing not to get stuck as he turned into Rosa's driveway. The neat little den sat by itself at the end of the road. The path leading to the front door was shoveled, as was the driveway. Looks like some male sniffed after her. Dimitri wondered who shoveled it for her as he cut the engine and jumped out of the truck.

"Make the gift work for me. Like I'm going to take orders from a dead werewolf." A cold breeze attacked Dimitri and he wrapped his coat around him instead of zipping it up and hurried to her door. Hairs prickled to life on his arms and at the back of his neck. A sensation he didn't like trickled down his spine. It was like all of a sudden bugs crawled all over his body. The urge to bolt, run until the insane feeling left him attacked with a fury he couldn't control. He tripped, catching his balance quickly, and paused before reaching the door. Glancing around quickly, Dimitri searched the area, but saw no one. He didn't smell a soul. But then maybe a soul couldn't be sniffed out.

As quickly as it hit, the sensation disappeared.

"Damn it, Bruno," he grumbled, straightening and letting go of his coat. No way would Rosa see him shivering like a pup when she opened her door for him.

Already he smelled coffee and ham frying. His stomach grumbled loud enough to drown out his thoughts.

The door opened and the sweet smell of lavender attacked his senses when Rosa smiled up at him.

"I poured coffee for you," she said quietly, stepping to the side to allow him entrance into her den.

"Good." He wouldn't let her see that he was surprised she knew he was here. Keeping his facial muscles relaxed, he cleared his mind, allowing himself to focus only on why he came.

The gift ran strong in Rosa. Too damned strong. And as unnerving as it was to have the dead appearing next to him in his truck, it equally bugged the shit out of him when bitches like Rosa knew his actions before he did them. There was only one issue at hand – making Rosa fix the mess she made of Tonya's den.

She stopped and turned to look up at him. "You saw Bruno?" she whispered, obviously ignoring his other thoughts.

"Get the fuck out of my head," he growled at her.

"We have company?" Maria Anthony, Rosa's mother, wiped her hands on a dish towel as she appeared in the kitchen doorway. "Well, Dimitri. What an honor that you would visit our den. You will join us to eat. Rosa made so much food this morning. Maybe she knew you were coming." The old bitch winked at him then smiled fondly at her daughter.

Rosa didn't return the smile. Instead she moved around her mother and picked up a coffee mug from the counter. She handed it to Dimitri. "What did you want?"

"You have a mess to clean up." He wouldn't insult her by asking if she intentionally flooded Tonya's den. And the way she stiffened, tilting her head slightly and pursing those full red lips of hers, he knew he had guessed correctly. "Let's go. I don't have all morning."

Rosa turned, pulling several pieces of thickly cut ham off a serving plate and placed them on a white china plate. She moved to the stove and scooped up a good helping of eggs, then grabbed a biscuit and broke it in two with her fingers. After handing him the plate, she turned and swiped a rich amount of creamy butter onto the biscuit and then plopped it onto his plate.

"Sit. Have your breakfast so you'll quit scowling. Then we'll go clean up your mess."

The little bitch wouldn't order him around. Dimitri put the plate on the table and grabbed a piece of ham and stuffed it into his mouth. He swallowed before he was done chewing. The perfectly sweetened piece of meat tasted real damned good. And possibly he would have sat if she hadn't just ordered him to.

Rosa sighed, making her own plate and moving to the table. She pulled out her chair but then gestured to the one on the opposite side of the table. "I would be rude not to serve my pack leader. Please honor us and sit and enjoy our kill."

He doubted she killed this pig. No way would he ever let on that he didn't know the extent of the gift that ran through her, but Rosa wasn't built to attack and kill. Far from it. "Maria, I need to speak to your daughter alone for a minute."

"That's fine." Maria either smelled a confrontation or thought there might be hope for her daughter and Dimitri if she left them alone. She grabbed her coffee and a biscuit. "I prefer to eat while watching TV anyway. You two have a nice chat."

Dimitri waited for Maria to leave and then sat at the table. He used a fork this time and attacked the perfectly cooked meat. It wasn't too often he got a home cooked meal. With both of his littermates mated now and living in dens of their own, he seldom bothered using his kitchen. It had been a while since he ate a meal in his flesh. Even with the smell of lavender distracting his nose from the cooked meat, the aroma from the food proved impossible to ignore.

Rosa held her coffee cup to her lips but didn't sip. Instead she watched Dimitri with her incredibly light brown eyes. He met her gaze, which was soft, compelling, as if she didn't have an agenda at all. He knew the bitch better. No matter that her light eyes—eyes that weren't even brown, more like tan—were like pools of open sincerity and honesty, he knew better than to trust her. Rosa had the gift.

She looked away first, her expression and scent suddenly smelling sad, proof she ignored his order to stay out of his head. "Is your meat to your liking?" she asked.

"It's perfect." Even her soft manner of speaking made it damned hard to ignore her. Not to mention she most likely was the sexiest bitch in the pack. She knew that though. Telling her would be pointless. Her gaze shot to his, again proof she followed his line of thinking. Maybe they didn't need to talk at all—he would just fucking think what he wanted to tell her and then leave.

"There's plenty. Eat as much as you want." She sipped her coffee and then tore a piece of her biscuit and sliced a piece of ham to go with it. "When you've had your breakfast you can tell me what you want from me."

"You already know the answer to that." He finished off his ham and then went for the eggs, wiping them up with his biscuit. She got up and brought the plate with ham on it and served him more without asking. He didn't stop her. "You're going to clean the Miccatto den up and apologize to them."

"I'd be more than pleased to help them clean it. But I can't think of a thing that I'm sorry for."

"Then maybe you should hang around in your own mind instead of everyone else's. I think you can. Good bitches don't trash other bitches' dens just because they don't like the way that bitch is acting."

"They don't?" She sounded so sincere that if he hadn't looked up at that moment he would have missed the glint of amusement in her expression.

"No. They don't," he told her.

"And you think I'm a good bitch?"

"I think you're going to be one."

"Oh." She poured him more coffee. Her wrist was slender and a small scar on the back of her hand looked like a white streak of lightning running over her tanned skin. "And is that all you want?"

She sat down across from him and put her elbows on the table, watching him eat. Her long black hair tumbled down past her shoulders. There was another scar just to the side of her mouth, barely noticeable unless someone looked for it, and it hardly hindered her intense sex appeal. In spite of his vow to not be interested, his cock stirred in his jeans.

Simply proof that he wasn't dead. Rosa wasn't the bitch for him. More than likely there wasn't a female in this pack for him. The thought sobered him, and suddenly the food didn't taste as good as it had a moment before. He would live with that truth though, just as he lived every day for the past five years. Keep his insides numb and his senses alert and ready to attack. That was the only way he could lead their pack.

"I want you to show me that you're better than Tonya," he told her and finished his coffee. "Her sire doesn't deserve to wallow around in melting snow. Get yourself ready to leave." He stood and stared at his wiped clean plate. "And thank you for breakfast."

"Anytime, wolf man," she mumbled and swayed past him, filling his nostrils with her rich, enticing scent as she left him standing in her kitchen.

Dimitri nodded to Maria, who lounged on her couch watching TV. Taking in the clean and nicely furnished den, he realized the two bitches did okay for themselves in spite of no male being around. At least he didn't know of any males who entered this den.

Letting himself out of the small cabin, he retraced his steps along the nicely shoveled path. Rosa's scent still lingered in his senses and her good cooking filled his gut. What male wouldn't want such a hot fucking bitch lying next to him, caring for him and preparing their kill then sitting and watching them enjoy it with such a peaceful and content air about her? His insides tightened and he looked around the snow-covered yard. He didn't smell any other werewolf. If someone had been here, it hadn't been recently.

Growling, he reached his truck and then turned, crossing his arms and waiting for Rosa. Like he cared if another male sniffed after her.

When her door opened and Rosa stepped outside, shutting it quietly behind her and then approaching him, she walked with the elegance of a queen bitch.

Make the gift work for you.

He heard the old werewolf's words in his head as he moved around his truck and opened the door for her. Rosa stopped, staring up at him before climbing in. "Will you tell me about your visit with Bruno?" she asked quietly.

"Get in," he instructed. "And no." Her ass looked real damned good in her tight blue jeans. Dimitri shut her door and headed around to his side. His stiff cock made it harder to move over the snow. Climbing in on his side also proved an irritating chore.

No way in hell would he give her the satisfaction of knowing that she made him hard just being around her.

"Please." She spoke so softly he almost didn't hear her.

Letting the truck rumble to life, Dimitri tried glaring at her. He came over to haul her cute little ass over to the Miccatto den. This was supposed to be a reprimand. Rosa couldn't get away with using the gift like that just because some slut had her paws all over him. It wasn't like he allowed the advances. There was no way he would choose Tonya over Rosa.

Not that he was choosing.

The corner of Rosa's mouth tilted into a small smile and the cab filled with the sweetest smell of happiness.

"Let's set one thing straight right now." He shifted so that he faced her and pointed his finger at her chest. She'd changed clothes when she left the kitchen and even though her leather coat hid most of her upper body, the soft looking pale pink sweater she wore underneath hugged her slim figure. He noticed the curve of her breast and forced his attention to her face. "I want your word that you'll stay out of my head and that you'll never use the gift out of spite."

"I can swear to the second one, but not the first."

"You'll swear to both."

"I don't know how," she said quietly.

Dimitri didn't understand the gift at all. But the last thing he would do right now was give it a thought, not when Rosa just told him she wouldn't stay out of his head. He grabbed the stick shift and shoved it into gear.

"You better learn, then."

She was quiet as he once again drove over the rough roads and back up the mountain. When he glanced at her, Rosa chewed her finger, looking very lost in thought over something. Her long, thick, black lashes draped over her tan eyes. She tucked a single long strand behind one ear and it fell down her back and over her shoulder. He knew it was the source of the faint whiff of lavender he caught on almost every breath.

"Why don't you know how?" He broke the silence and Rosa looked worried when she focused on him.

"I hear everyone's thoughts whether I want to or not. Believe me, it's not always that fun. And I know you hate the gift. Can't we talk about something else?"

"I don't hate the gift."

"Yes you do. Otherwise you wouldn't hate me so much."

"I don't hate you."

"You turn me down every time I come near you." She shifted so that her body faced him. When they went over a good-sized hole in the road, she grabbed his dash, causing

her jacket to open and offering a wonderful view of her perky breasts bouncing up and down. "And you're always angry."

"I'm not angry. Running a pack doesn't allow time to make friends."

"You think I want to be friends?" She really did look shocked.

"I have no idea what you want."

"I want you, wolf man."

His cock got harder than it had in ages. And he was truly surprised to see her blush when he looked at her. "Why, Rosa?" he demanded. "Because I'm pack leader? Trust me. Find someone else. I'm not what you want."

"Not because you're pack leader. Because..." She stopped and her cheeks darkened the most beautiful shade of red.

This conversation bordered on dangerous. Dimitri turned his attention to the road. "Because why?" he prompted.

"Because every night I dream about fucking you and every morning I wake up swearing I smell your scent inside me."

Chapter Three

Rosa stared out the passenger window at the Miccatto den when Dimitri stopped his truck in their driveway. "I can fix it from here. I don't need to get out."

She stared at the mountainous terrain beyond the small cabin. The snow would continue melting over the next couple months, the rivers would swell and fishing would be great. She cocked her head, willing the melting snow to return to its normal course and no longer flood the little slut's den.

Focusing on the gift with Dimitri so close to her proved more of a challenge than she realized. He thought she wanted him because of his rank. But more than anyone, Rosa saw how being pack leader tore up his insides. He hated the gift, despised the memories of Malta that threatened to destroy him. And here she sat next to him, using the gift that he hated. If only she could soothe those thoughts, bring peace to the outrage that she always smelled on him.

And yes, she would do anything to soothe the need that ran rampant inside her.

"You're getting out." Dimitri's harsh tone only made her heart pound harder.

"I gave you my word that I wouldn't use the gift out of spite. The only way I can do that is to not enter situations where I would be tempted to do so."

"How is getting out going to make you spiteful?"

Hadn't she humiliated herself enough with this werewolf? She turned quickly, shoving her hair out of her face and fighting to keep her voice calm so he wouldn't pick up on the many emotions flooding her insides worse than the snow flooded into streams outside.

"Because I don't want that fucking bitch touching you," she hissed.

Dimitri's eyes were almost black when he stared at her. She heard the several responses he considered giving her before he spoke. "Tonya touches every male in the pack."

Rosa preferred the comment that he didn't voice. *No other bitch will touch me.*

Tonya wouldn't touch him—not again. Hopefully this stunt put the bitch in her place. "The snow isn't melting into their den anymore."

Dimitri growled and opened his door. She stared at him, but then he reached for her too quickly for her to move and yanked her out his side.

"Come with me." His dark eyes smoldered like thunderheads that could explode without notice.

"I'm not going to apologize. I'd do it again if she gets out of line."

"Are you going to attack any bitch who touches me?" A hint of silver raced over his pupils, the only sign that emotions pumped in his veins strongly enough to call forth the change.

"It depends on how she touches you and what she's thinking when she does it," Rosa told him truthfully.

He still held her arm and didn't move out of the way when she slid out of the truck and stood before him. The open door trapped her between him and his truck, and everything that was Dimitri filled her senses. She kept her expression in check, watching for his reaction. Her words didn't turn him off. He wasn't repulsed like he was last night when Tonya tried to get him to mount her in front of everyone. But she didn't smell lust either.

"I'm capable of defending myself." His thoughts were in turmoil. He couldn't decide whether to punish her further or make time to be alone with her longer.

She opted for the second choice. "I know you are. Just as I am. And I'll also defend what I want."

"And what if you don't get it?"

Rosa stared at him. She didn't have a ready answer. It was too early to know if she could capture Dimitri or not. Until she knew, no other bitch would get close to him.

Her silence bugged him. "Rosa..." A quick flood of emotions attacked him and opened a window into his mind. He wanted her. Whether it was lust, or something deeper, she couldn't tell. But it offered a light of hope, something to sniff out and learn if it was real or not. "Let's go," he finished, keeping his hand on her arm and pulling her around the door then closing it.

"Why is she here?" Tonya reeked of the temper tantrum she was ready to throw the moment they were inside her den.

"Enough." Her sire sliced his hand through the air, his anger spicy enough to fill the den and silence the mouthy tramp. Ben turned his back on her and faced Dimitri. "The water isn't coming in under the back door anymore."

"Very good." Dimitri looked around the living room, at the small items picked up off the floor and the throw carpets hanging over the back of chairs in front of the fireplace. "I'll send someone by later to make sure there isn't any structural damage."

He walked through their den and out the back door, keeping Rosa by his side the entire time. Whether he wanted to hold on to her or didn't trust her if he let her go, Rosa couldn't tell. She kept her attention in front of her and didn't look at Tonya. For Dimitri, she would fight to be civil. Hanging the bitch from one of the higher branches in the trees out back sounded like a good plan though.

"Thank you for making her fix her little fit." Tonya actually dared to step in front of them and focused on Dimitri, ignoring Rosa. "Our den is safe now thanks to you. I really am in your debt."

Then the bitch actually touched him, running her hand right up his chest. Fire boiled inside Rosa. Tonya actually thought she had a chance with Dimitri and loved the idea of being queen bitch.

Like that would ever happen. Rosa glared at the painted fingernails that spread over Dimitri's chest. They were a burnt orange—like fire.

"Ouch!" Tonya hissed, yanking her hand back and then staring at it as a wild look crossed her face. Instantly her teeth grew and she growled at Rosa while nursing her burnt hand. "Do you really think he wants anything to do with a bitch who throws the gift around the way you do?" she hissed.

"That's enough," Dimitri barked, not giving Rosa a chance to put Tonya in her place.

The big branch hanging over them might knock some sense into the bitch's head.

Rosa almost slipped in the snow when Dimitri turned around and marched to the side of the Miccatto den. His grip on her arm tightened enough to cut off her circulation, and he didn't let go but almost dragged her to his truck. Opening his passenger door, he threw her inside. She pulled her legs in so that he wouldn't slam the door on her.

His jaw was set firm and his mouth barely moved when he grumbled something to the old werewolf. With just a few long strides, he reached the driver's side and climbed inside. Oddly enough though, he didn't smell like anger.

And he didn't say anything when he put the truck in gear and pulled out of the driveway.

The heavy down coat he wore made his chest look even bigger and his shoulders broader. He sat straight behind the wheel, not looking at her but gripping the wheel and staring ahead. Rosa relaxed on her side, listening to his thoughts ramble and taking in his firm jawline, his straight nose and dark lashes that hooded his gaze. Thick, black hair tumbled to his shoulders. She itched to touch it, pull his head back and demand all of his attention.

She preoccupied his thoughts, but he fought with everything he had to keep his mind on pack business. All she could hear were the thoughts he focused on each moment. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't search deeper into his mind and learn more about him. Having learned the gift from her cousin, Dante, when she was a teenager, she didn't know if there were ways to probe deeper. Someday she would ask her cousin, but today, all she heard was what he wanted her to hear.

And he refused to think about anything that had to do with her.

It shouldn't surprise her that his thoughts were as stubborn as his actions.

"Why are we here?" Rosa had been focused so intently on Dimitri's mind that she didn't realize they were headed to his den until he parked his truck in his drive.

"Pay more attention to your surroundings. You should have asked me where we were headed long before now." He caught her in the act of focusing on his thoughts, and the gleam in his intense gaze told her as much.

Without answering her question, he turned off his truck and got out.

She would either sit in the cab and freeze or follow him inside. Rosa jumped out on her side.

"You didn't answer me," she said, hurrying after him.

Dimitri unlocked his den and pushed the door open, closing it with his boot after they entered. It was cold enough inside to see her breath. Dimitri walked over to his fireplace.

"Werewolves are hunters, Rosa. Males don't like being hunted."

She stood just inside the door, crossing her arms against the cold, and stared at his backside while he built a fire. "Okay."

"So why are you hunting me?"

"Why did you bring me here?"

He struck a match and flames ignited. "Attacking other bitches who give me attention is definitely hunting."

"Did you want her attention?"

"No." He didn't hesitate with his answer. "But I don't need a protector."

"You brought me here for a reprimand?" She hated not being able to gain anything from his thoughts. The bastard repeated the code of werewolf chivalry, a simple lesson taught to every cub, over and over in his mind until it made her want to scream.

Attack with honor, not with anger.

Know your enemy better than he knows himself.

Show mercy when killing and mercy will be shown to you.

Dimitri stood slowly, keeping his back to her. Repeating those three lines over and over in his head took one hell of a lot of concentration. It meant that much to him that Rosa not know his thoughts. That bit of knowledge burned her insides like nasty heartburn.

"I brought you here," he began, and then turned to face her. Dark brown eyes glowed in the room lit only by the dancing flames from the fire. "Because your personal agenda is now affecting other members of my pack."

"This isn't my pack too?" She knew she toyed with his words, but throwing him off guard might make him drop his mental mantra and allow her into his mind.

"It is." He continued mentally repeating the code, but moved toward her silently. "And I'm your pack leader. If there's a problem in this pack, I'm going to fix it."

"You see a problem?" Her mouth was too dry.

She stared up at him with her back pressed against his front door. Her heart thudded in her chest loud enough that he had to hear it. And the smell of caution and lust suddenly made it damned hard to focus.

"One that I plan on fixing immediately." He grabbed her hair, forcing her head back.

With as quick of a movement, he shoved her coat from her shoulders. She crooked her arms, keeping it from falling to the floor, but couldn't manage to prevent herself from panting.

And still he repeated those three damned sentences over and over in his mind. Rosa had no idea where his actions would lead. It scared her to death, and thrilled her at the same time. The emotions racing inside her had her gasping for air.

"What are you going to do?" She tried straightening her head but he had a firm grip on her hair. Relaxing her head, she closed her eyes, which made her vulnerable.

He wouldn't hurt her. No matter what action he took, Rosa repeated in her mind, he wouldn't hurt her. Nonetheless, she trembled when he moved his other hand to her neck and ran his finger down the length of it.

"You don't know, do you?" His hoarse whisper scraped over her flesh, giving her chills.

"No."

Dimitri touched the top of her shirt and continued holding her hair so she couldn't straighten her head. He scraped his fingernail over her nipple and drew a line down her front until he gripped the bottom of her shirt. She felt his knuckles rub against her bare flesh when he pulled her shirt free from her jeans.

"You're accustomed to manipulating a situation. The gift has tampered with your ability to use any other sense to understand what's going on around you." He spoke quietly, using a cool whisper. There wasn't enough of a scent coming from him to tell if he spoke with a cutting edge or out of sympathy.

She didn't want either emotion. "That's not true. You aren't offering anything for me to learn more about you."

"I'm offering plenty—just not the one thing you know how to grab on to," he said in a calm, deadly sounding whisper.

She squeezed her eyes shut, sucking in her breath while trying her damndest to get the three sentences he continually repeated out of her head. He raised her shirt, exposing her breasts, and then lifted her bra. Her nipples puckered so hard that they hurt.

And still he continued repeating those three fucking sentences.

Rosa wanted to scream!

She ached for him to touch her more.

What the hell was he about?

He squeezed one nipple and she squealed, opening her eyes quickly. He tightened his grip on her hair, refusing to let her lift her head to better focus on him.

"What are you doing?" she cried out.

"You don't know?"

"How can I?" He was making her mad—crazy in the head with those three despicable sentences rolling over and over in his mind.

"You've never had a male touch you?" he continued whispering, now cupping her breast and then lowering his mouth to nibble on her nipple.

Rosa screamed, clawing at the door behind her and then reaching for him. She wanted to pull him closer and throw him across the room at the same time.

"That's not what I mean," she said, gasping for air and digging her fingers into his shoulders.

Raw strength greeted her fingernails. She held on to him for dear life as need unleashed inside her, soaking her underwear and filling the room with the sweet smell of her lust.

"I think my actions are very clear." He moved to her other breast and scraped her puckered nipple with his teeth.

Sweet pain ransacked her senses. He then offered incredible pleasure when he gently sucked her into his mouth.

He continued repeating the code. Three sentences. One after another. His thoughts were monotone as each sentence spilled into her mind – over and over.

"God! Stop!" She couldn't take it any longer.

Dimitri let go of her instantly, backing away so fast that she stumbled forward, clawing at air to stable herself before she finally grabbed his arm.

"What? No..." she mumbled, every inch of her pulsing out of control with desire that she'd barely managed to keep at bay since she entered this pack.

"You told me to stop." Dimitri didn't make her let go of his arm, nor did he do anything to help cover her.

"Stop repeating those three damned sentences," she said, suddenly feeling defeated.

"Not until you stop entering my mind."

"I don't know how to do that," she wailed, clinging to him now, wanting to shake him until he understood the truth. "Don't you see? I could stop breathing easier than I can stop hearing someone's thoughts."

"Just because a task is hard doesn't mean it's impossible."

"It's not like that." When she shook her head, a strand of hair fell over her eye. "I truly don't know how to not hear what you're thinking."

Dimitri brushed her hair from her face. It dawned on her that her shirt and bra were still pushed up over her breasts. Her nipples were damp and burned from his attention. She reached to lower her shirt.

He grabbed her wrist, stopping her. "You want me."

She looked up and saw the lust smoldering in his eyes. What she smelled in the air between them obviously didn't come from just her.

"You're dying to feel me swelling deep inside you."

She bit her lip, sniffing and trying to learn what emotions came from him. His hardened expression was impossible to read.

"You know I do," she confessed, hating the heat that stung her cheeks and the swelling that filled her breasts, making them feel too heavy. What she wouldn't do to have his strong fingers cupping them again.

"What do I want?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Why don't you know?"

She clenched her teeth together, fighting to spit out the obvious to him. But he continued staring at her, holding her wrist with one hand while she gripped his arm. They were so close. Everything that entered his mind should be as clear as glass to her. But he wouldn't quit with those three sentences.

"Because I can't hear what you're thinking so long as you continue saying that fucking code over and over again in your head," she screamed, frustration and anger attacking her furiously.

She yanked herself away from him, turning her back and reaching for her shirt. Dimitri was playing with her. Whatever sick joke he enjoyed, she was done with it.

He grabbed her so quickly, lifting her off the floor. Rosa twisted, instinct telling her to fight. She tried kicking herself free, but he was so much bigger, a hell of a lot stronger and real fucking determined to prove something.

Dimitri screamed the code in his mind as he marched through his den, holding her against his steel chest until they reached his bedroom. He tossed her on the bed as if she weighed nothing.

Rosa scrambled to her feet, but he was too fast.

Attack with honor, not with anger.

Know your enemy better than he knows himself.

Show mercy when killing and mercy will be shown to you.

He pulled her pants zipper down and then shoved them down her hips as she squirmed underneath him.

"Please quit repeating yourself," she begged.

"Why do you focus on what's in my head instead of what is going on around you?" he asked, flipping her over with her jeans and underwear tangled at her knees.

She couldn't get away from him. And damn her for being an idiot, but she didn't want to. No matter that he mocked her, made fun of her and insulted her, Rosa relaxed, wiping a burning tear from her eye.

"Because that is what I do," she told him, staring up at him while he took in her naked body. "How else would I know what a werewolf is about?"

"Rosa." He said her name gruffly. "Smell me. Feel me. Watch what I'm about. Don't you know how to do any of that?"

"Of course I do." She had no idea what he was talking about.

"I don't think you do." He shrugged out of his coat and then slowly unbuttoned his flannel shirt.

Her mouth went dry as she stared at his muscular chest. Tiny black curls spread over roped tendons and muscles. His dark skin glistened with sweat in spite of the chill in the air. Something in the back of her fogged brain realized that it took a hell of a lot of effort on his part to continually repeat those sentences in his mind while concentrating on her as well.

He took a step backward and she heard his boots make a thudding noise as he kicked them off his feet. Then he unzipped his jeans and peeled them off of his firm, hard legs.

So much werewolf stood before her that she could hardly breathe.

"Take your clothes off, little bitch," he told her.

Rosa did what he told her to do without taking her gaze from him. She pulled her shirt over her head and slipped her bra off. Then sitting on her rear, she scooted the rest of the way out of her jeans. Never in her life had she seen a cock as hard and long as Dimitri's. She licked her dry lips, moving to her knees and tossing her clothes off the bed.

"This isn't how I thought it would be." Sudden nervousness made her jumpy.

"Why? Because you don't know what I'm thinking?"

"I don't like not knowing."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know what to expect." She frowned when the smallest of smiles played at his lips.

Dimitri came over her, crawling on all fours like the deadly predator he was. She collapsed onto his bed, breathing in everything that smelled of him. His blankets, his pillows, the hard-packed body just over hers—he overwhelmed her with his aggressive scent. His expression was intense, hard and intent as always, but there was something else that she couldn't figure out. She smelled his body and fought to understand his emotions. This wasn't how she usually read a werewolf.

"Then you'll have to trust me."

"I trust you."

His expression softened, just a bit. But it was a side of Dimitri she wondered if anyone had ever seen before. He was so fucking gorgeous she wanted to cry from the extreme emotions attacking her. His hair fell in uneven strands, bordering his face as he looked down at her. With his lips slightly parted and moist, she caught a glimpse of his sharp white teeth. They added to his virility. But it was the way he stared at her, as if he had the gift and saw deep into her soul, to places she didn't even know that well, that made her insides swell even more for him.

"You trust your gift," he told her. "In fact, you trust it so much that you don't rely on any other instincts to guide you. Without it, you're completely defenseless."

He lowered his head and nipped at her lip. This time she reached for him, trying to deepen the kiss, but he pulled away in spite of her arms being around him.

"Is that what you want? A bitch who relies completely on instinct?" She tilted her head, feeling the softness of his pillow underneath her as she examined his expression.

Attack with honor, not with anger.

Know your enemy better than he knows himself.

Show mercy when killing and mercy will be shown to you.

One way or another, he would stop with his damned mantra. She scraped her fingernails down his chest, digging in so that red marks appeared. He growled, silver shooting across his pupils like lightning.

"Many skilled sluts have tried to get me to say what kind of bitch I would mate with."

"How dare you!" she hissed, immediately seeing Tonya in her mind, strutting her perfumed ass up to Dimitri and practically lifting her tail for him.

Fury raged through her and she shifted, trying to push her way out from underneath him.

"How dare I what?" he asked, sounding amused. The aroma in the air around him changed too.

He didn't laugh, although maybe that's what she smelled. Instead of letting her slide off the bed, he grabbed her legs, going up on his knees as he opened her and spread her out before him. Her own scent attacked her with a brutal reality.

No matter her frustration at his unapproachable stubbornness, she couldn't hide how much she still wanted him. Hell. She ached for him daily, thought about him constantly. If she walked away from this moment without taking him, she would never forgive herself. Even if his terms didn't sit well with her. Fucking him without knowing his mind was hardly how she imagined this playing out.

"I'm not a slut," she whispered.

"No. You're not." He pressed his hard cock against her pussy and fire built inside her, shooting flames throughout her insides that she would never be able to put out on her own. He pushed slightly, barely entering her. "You're way too damned naïve, relying on the gift for so many years that you have no clue how to survive without it."

She would have thrown her rebuttal out at him quickly, but he thrust inside her with so much force she slid up the bed until her head hit the headboard.

Rosa screamed. She reached for him blindly and sparks exploded before her eyes as his thick cock impaled her, nearly splitting her in two.

Everything inside her exploded, her mind, her body, her entire world, blowing up and leaving her floating without a center. And Dimitri didn't let up once he filled her. He fucked her like it was a race, gripping her legs so that his fingers pinched her flesh, preventing her from moving as he rode her harder and faster than she ever imagined sex with him would be like.

Again and again he hit the same spot, wearing down any defense she might have managed to put up against him during his verbal attack. Her insides melted, then the pressure built again, only to flood over and leave her breathless. And still he didn't relent. She came harder than she ever had before. Breathless and fighting to focus, she didn't stand a chance when he stroked her insides so hard and fast that she simply exploded again.

"Dimitri," she cried out, barely able to speak and hardly able to see.

Blindly she clawed at him, trying to hold on. Her world tilted. She would fall off, never able to regain her composure or be the same again. In all of her fantasies, she never imagined him being like this.

Sure she pictured him as a rough lover, hard and demanding. That would be his cover. But Rosa always believed she could melt that tough exterior, find the werewolf underneath who craved a female, one to run by his side and be his equal. One he would trust with his mind and not manipulate her so that she couldn't even penetrate him.

A growl built inside him, growing louder until Dimitri howled and pulled out, leaving her burning and throbbing. He spilled his come over her belly. She stared at the hot, salty-smelling cream that looked so white against her dark skin.

Dimitri backed away from her, holding his hard and swollen cock as if it weighed too much for him to stand without attending to it. When he turned and left her, she fought to clear her vision and stared breathless at the muscular body and firm ass that flexed as he moved.

And that's when his mind opened to her, his impenetrable brick wall crashing down, weakened, possibly, from his release.

If only she didn't have the gift. The one thought that hit her before he left her alone in his room, closing himself in the bathroom, bit at her harder than if she'd been slapped across the face.

Chapter Four

"I'm going in alone." Dimitri wouldn't look at his littermate, who he knew scowled in the passenger seat.

"Not a good idea." Nicolo smelled frustrated.

Well Dimitri knew that emotion better than the back of his hand. His littermate could damned well be as frustrated as he wanted.

"Tough. That's how it is." He reached for his door handle.

Nicolo touched Dimitri's arm.

Dimitri scowled at his older littermate, seeing the earnest concern painted in the male's expression. "What?"

"You can't go in there smelling like you do," Nicolo said quietly.

Dimitri wasn't in the mood for Nicolo's calm, instructive nature. His older littermate always wanted to guide Dimitri, advise him on his every move. Since he had a mate now, it wasn't as bad as when they were younger. But Heidi had just found out she was going to have a cub, which meant when Nicolo did run with Dimitri, he was annoyingly good-natured, always beaming—absolutely fucking reeking with happiness—and even more loaded down with advice and suggestions on how Dimitri should behave and act.

"Smelling like what?"

"Like you're pissed at the world."

He *was* pissed at the world.

"It will smell better if I go in alone." He looked between them and then picked up that packet of papers that was thicker than some books he had read. "Not that I'm expecting them to jump to my demands. But it's time Werewolf Affairs acknowledges Malta werewolves."

"They acknowledge us. That's the problem." Nicolo grinned and opened his passenger door. "They acknowledge that we're here in their country and that they don't want us here."

"That's about to change." Dimitri would end up making a scene in front of the small bureaucratic office if he forced his littermate to stay in the truck. He should have left the asshole at his den. "Fine. Go in if you fucking must." He pointed a finger at his older littermate. "Just remember who leads this pack and keep quiet."

"Just going to sniff the place out a bit." Nicolo held his hands out in a mock show of innocence and got out of the truck.

The branch office of Werewolf Affairs was a small brick building outside of Valle, Colorado. It looked almost like a ranger station, or possibly some kind of utility outbuilding sitting by itself on the quiet highway. The valley spread out on all sides of them, fading into the mountains beyond it. Much of the snow melted in this open area. It smelled wet and muddy. Their boots clicked against the damp concrete as they walked up the wide, cleared sidewalk toward the glass doors and then inside the government agency.

Of course there were no signs, no marquees, no banners or anything indicating what the name of this place was, or the kind of work done there. Humans barely managed accepting the fact that werewolves truly existed. They were far from ready to comprehend that werewolves were as involved with the American government as humans.

Well, most werewolves were.

Just like humans, breed mattered.

The look the woman behind the front desk gave them proved what Dimitri already knew. Malta werewolves weren't welcome here.

"I'm Dimitri Spalto, pack leader of the Malta werewolves here in the mountains. Here is all of the incorporation paperwork." He held the packet of papers out to the bitch behind the desk. "We're applying to make our pack into a town."

She looked at it as if it might bite her.

Dimitri doubted the uptight-smelling American bitch would be worth even a nibble.

"I'd like to speak with one of the representatives." He dropped his hand to his side, continuing to hold the papers that took fucking hours to fill out. "Tell him I'm here."

The bitch pursed her lips, her scent growing more and more distasteful the longer he stood in the entrance. He stared at the two doors behind the female. There were at least several other werewolves back there. He could smell them. The entire place smelled uptight and stifled. And Nicolo worried *his* scent would stink.

"There's an application and filing fee." She sounded bored.

"I read that." One hundred and fifty dollars was a hell of a lot of money to come up with when he was here to try to get funds for his pack. "The check is with the paperwork."

"You can leave it here. If you included your phone number and address, someone will contact you."

"I did." He didn't appreciate his intelligence being insulted. "It says in the paperwork to meet with a representative once everything is filled out."

"You didn't set up an appointment. They're very busy."

Dimitri leaned forward, fisting his hands at the edge of her desk, and narrowed his gaze on her. Immediately her scent changed from stuffy to incredibly nervous.

"I left several messages announcing I would bring in this paperwork. Once I spoke to a bitch on the phone, possibly you." He raised an eyebrow and watched her shift in her chair. "The paperwork doesn't say make an appointment. You didn't say you would set up an appointment. It says to speak to a representative. Now, are you going to go back there and let them know I'm here or should I do that on my own?"

She wasn't anything he would sniff after under different circumstances, and when she inhaled a sharp breath and her perfectly round breasts pressed against her nicely ironed dress, he picked up something else on her. Curiosity, possibly. It wouldn't surprise him if the bitch could count on one hand how many Malta werewolves she'd seen in her life. A hint of silver darted over her dull eyes before she broke her gaze, diverting her attention to the items scattered on her desk.

"Once someone looks over the paperwork, they will speak with you. That's how it works, wolf man. Leave the paperwork or take it with you. It really doesn't matter to me."

"I can see that." He walked around her desk, heading for the doors, and pushed one of them open before the bitch jumped to her feet to stop him.

"You can't just go back there. Who the hell do you think you are?"

"I think I'm the pack leader of the Malta werewolves," he hissed at her.

"I don't care if you're Peter fucking Pan," she growled, shoving her small body between him and the entrance to the back offices. "Leave your paperwork with me or take it with you. Either way, that is all you're going to accomplish here today."

"Like hell it is." He didn't spend hours answering the same question from seven different angles to simply let it drift into some pile of ignored applications. The forms he was required to turn in to the government in order to get their pack incorporated and acknowledged officially by Werewolf Affairs and the United States government gave him about as bad of a headache as this bitch was now. "I tell you what—since you say an appointment is required, set that appointment up for right now. Then turn around and go tell one of your werewolves back there to come out here and talk to me—now."

In spite of her size, she looked like she would attack. Possibly she was accustomed to being harassed with her job. If she treated everyone who walked into this building the way she treated him, it wouldn't surprise him in the least.

"Is there a problem here?" A tall, thin werewolf wearing a suit and looking and smelling like he possibly had never been on a good run in his entire life stepped around the partially opened door and sized Dimitri up. "What do we have here?"

"Who are you?" Dimitri asked.

"He refuses to leave his paperwork," the bitch complained, moving out of Dimitri's way and returning to her desk.

The male facing him stood as tall as Dimitri but with less than half the muscle tone. He stared at Dimitri for a moment, glanced at Nicolo behind him and then looked down at the packet in Dimitri's hand. He reached for it.

"Leave everything with me and someone will contact you."

"So suddenly an appointment is no longer needed?"

"No." The American male offered no further explanation.

Dimitri opened the packet and pointed to his number on the first page. "You have until sundown to call me at that number. If not, I'll be here first thing tomorrow. Consider my appointment set."

He stuffed the papers into the male's chest, forcing him to move quickly so they wouldn't scatter all over the floor. Dimitri turned and stormed out of the building with Nicolo on his heels.

Forcing his fingers to relax around the steering wheel, Dimitri drove back to their pack. The smell of his outrage was nauseating, and he rolled down his window. The cold air hitting his face didn't help much.

"Do you really think it will be any different tomorrow?" Nicolo asked when they reached the base of their mountain.

"It's going to have to be. One way or another, the government will acknowledge us. They have no problem making us pay taxes. They will fund our pack just like they do the American werewolf packs or I'll stuff their fucking prejudice straight down their throats."

"That will do a lot of good."

Dimitri glared at his littermate. "Sometimes your passivity fucking stinks."

"And your ongoing anger smells any better?" Nicolo countered. "Do you really think if we were back in Malta our government would jump any faster to give us a damned dime?"

"We will not discuss Malta," Dimitri hissed.

"We should. Sooner or later you have to put the past to rest."

"What the hell does my past have to do with anything?"

Nicolo sighed and ran his fingers through his thick black hair. "You can't go back there angry and expecting a handout. It won't get you anywhere."

"I'm not asking for a fucking handout. Of all people, you would know that I don't expect anyone to give us anything without my having to claw and scratch for it."

"And you should know that this government isn't going to help us any faster than our old government did."

"I just said we won't discuss Malta."

"It's what has you so pissed off all the time."

"So now you have the gift? You know what is in my head?"

"What else would have you mad?"

Dimitri didn't answer. He was suddenly too distracted by memory of a sweat-covered, sexy body panting heavily underneath him. Remembering the other day

wouldn't help matters at the moment. His silence alerted Nicolo, who was quite possibly the only werewolf in the pack who read Dimitri a bit too well.

"There is something else?" Nicolo prodded.

"No." Dimitri wouldn't talk to Nicolo about Rosa.

There was nothing to say.

"It's your story." Nicolo tapped his window with his knuckle, getting Dimitri to glance that way. "What kind of funding are we asking for?"

Outside, at the base of their mountain, several dens sold and bartered merchandise they bought wholesale or made by their own hands. There were three trucks parked in a row, and a den or two stood casually talking around them.

"Probably be a good idea to stop." Dimitri turned the wheel and pulled his truck in alongside the others.

Their pack had grown enough over the winter that shops offering bare essentials would benefit everyone. Sure, any of the pack could head into Valle, but Malta werewolves understood that meant supporting the American werewolf business owners. Not that any of them had it out for the Americans. But Malta werewolves needed to work for Malta werewolves. It was the only way they would grow in strength and gain the respect of this great, enterprising country around them, who bragged loudly that such a thing was possible to all who lived here and paid taxes.

Well they sure as hell paid taxes.

"Dimitri." Perry Zammit stepped away from the group first, grinning, with his hand extended in greeting. "And Nicolo. Good to see you here at our small shopping center."

Claudette, Perry's mate, giggled at his joke. "We're honored that you stopped." She supported her growing belly with her hand and looked up at Nicolo. "And I hear from the howling that your mate will have a cub soon too."

"So much for late night runs," Perry said, still grinning, and slapped Nicolo on the back.

Claudette punched her mate in the arm and he feigned pain. She looked far from irritated with her mate though. Dimitri couldn't remember the last time he smelled anything but sincere happiness on the couple.

"I've been busy making some adorable cub clothing." She pointed at a stack of items on the back of the truck. "Maria has helped me, and taught me so much. We're selling them for a very reasonable price. Of course, Perry insists we also work with trade."

"For Nicolo, you make sure they are sold at cost," Perry told his mate.

She nodded solemnly.

"Appreciate it," Nicolo told them. "And I'll be sure and let Heidi know. Maybe we could work a trade. Already she wants another room added onto the den."

"I hear you." Perry used his thumb to point at Claudette, who simply beamed at him. "She wants additions added on as well. I could use the help."

"Same here."

Dimitri let the two males talk about their growing dens. It translated easily into meaning the pack would be larger a year from now. All the more reason to fight for funding for better roads, permits to zone so they could build stores—all of which meant getting Werewolf Affairs to work with him.

"I thought the word was that you didn't have the gift." Maria Anthony sat in a lawn chair set between two of the pickup trucks and fiddled with what looked like a ball of yarn in her lap.

"I don't." He held out his hand and helped her stand.

The old bitch huffed and scratched him before letting go and walking around him to the edge of the truck. "You got some good tricks if I can smell you so easily in my den but not see you."

Dimitri glanced around quickly, silently grateful that no one seemed to overhear her snide comment. "How are sales going for you?" he asked, having no intention of commenting on her remark that Rosa carried his scent.

"Build me a shop and they will go much better." She picked up a small, fat jar covered with a checkered cloth that was secured with an elastic tie. "The Cajun spiced jerky sold the quickest. But I think you'll find this deer jerky seasoned to your liking."

Dimitri dug his wallet out and handed her a bill. She stuffed it in to her dress pocket and handed him the jar.

"Rosa makes the best jerky on the mountain."

"Where is she?" He'd returned her to her den two days ago and hadn't seen her since. Not that he sought her out. Although more than once, the urge almost overcame him to do so.

"I'm sure I don't know." Maria gave him a condemning look. "It's not like she has a keeper. My daughter can do whatever she wants. Any male who howls after her has a chance unless one of them speaks out for her."

"There are males howling after her?"

"Do you think a bitch as beautiful as my daughter would be ignored by the single males of this pack? She is smart, very pretty and blessed with more of the gift than any other member of this pack has in one paw," she hissed and then stabbed her bony finger into his chest. "And just because a male uses her and then ignores her... She will get over it eventually and see how many others are begging for the right to run by her side."

"No one has used her." It didn't sit well thinking that he might have hurt her. But damn it, she begged for months for what he gave her.

"No?" Maria sniffed the air, then glanced around at the other pack members who weren't paying any attention to them. "My daughter has honor. You steal that away

from her and I swear I'll haunt you from the grave. I don't care if you are pack leader — not even you are good enough for the likes of Rosa Anthony."

"I wouldn't argue with you on that one," he told her honestly. Then blowing out a sigh, he stared past her at the rough road that disappeared on a curve up into the mountain.

Dimitri hadn't dishonored Rosa. No matter what he said to the older bitch, she wouldn't understand that. He got her meaning though. Maybe a visit to her den would appease Maria. It wasn't required that he please her. But old bitches could gossip worse than anything. Right now, the last thing he needed were false rumors about him growing out of proportion.

"Nicolo tells me you two were just over at Werewolf Affairs." Perry nodded to Maria and then stood next to her, facing Dimitri. "You're going to kick ass as pack leader when you get them to give us funding to get this mountain cranking."

Others overheard Perry and quickly surrounded them. Every one of them there was a merchant, aching for the chance to get their own business going and no longer sell their items out of the backs of their trucks.

"I know many of you work out of your dens right now." Something had to be said to follow up on Perry's comment. The smells of anticipation and hope couldn't be extinguished, and telling him exactly what happened today would do just that. "And I don't have to tell you that nothing happens overnight. But we're howling as loud as we can. The government here is slower even than on Malta."

A few groans, followed up by some lighthearted American jokes kept the air free of hostility. His pack craved becoming a prosperous town as badly as he did.

"But I've completed the paperwork to start zoning. Once we get that through, then we can put a few of you into stores."

"How will you decide who gets a store first?" Perry asked.

The others in the group seconded the question and Dimitri searched the group, noting who asked, and the products they sold. Beyond the group, Nicolo stood next to Dimitri's truck. At some point, Juan Anthony had shown up. He stood talking to Nicolo. Erin, Juan's mate and Dimitri's youngest littermate, watched Dimitri and smiled when he met her gaze.

"I'll base that on supply and demand. It will be a decision I won't make lightly, or without discussing it with many of you."

Dimitri inhaled the excitement of everyone around him. The werewolves down at WA barely let him in the door, yet his pack was so convinced he would turn them into a great community. He listened as they rambled around him, talking over each other while tossing out possibilities of what their first store would be.

Hell. He didn't even have funding to improve their roads.

And he would be damned surprised if that skinny werewolf even glanced at all the forms he had struggled to complete.

Keeping his expression in check and making sure he didn't smell of any of the frustration he felt, Dimitri worked his way around the merchants toward Nicolo and the others.

"I want to talk to you," Erin told him without ceremony as soon as he reached her, Juan and Nicolo.

She tugged at his coat sleeve and dragged him to the other side of his truck. Erin smelled angry. He really wasn't in the mood to hear his youngest littermate bitch.

"What?" he demanded when she crossed her arms and glared at him.

"I would be the first to defend you if anyone accused you of being cold-hearted. But how could you?"

"How could I be cold-hearted?" He glared at her fiery expression. "When annoying little bitches make no sense and get in my face, it's pretty damned easy."

She punched him in the chest. "She cried all day yesterday," Erin hissed, glancing around her and beyond him toward her mate and Nicolo. She then continued to bless him with her cold glare. "You're an asshole, Dimitri. Do you know that?"

"So I've been told a time or two." He started getting an idea what she was talking about. What made no sense whatsoever was why Rosa would be crying.

And he wasn't cold-hearted. He wished he were. But just thinking that Rosa might be crying, whatever the reason, made his blood boil.

Erin squeezed his arm. "You'll go talk to Rosa, right?"

He stared into his youngest littermate's imploring dark eyes. Just then Juan joined them, giving him an odd look and then focusing on his mate.

"Are you ready?" Juan's voice was gentle.

She nodded and let go of Dimitri, but kept her gaze on him as she walked away.

"What's going on?" Nicolo asked.

"Nothing." He headed over to his truck.

Erin tried to manipulate his actions. And no bitch, not even his littermate, would trap him into doing something.

Sure he'd pondered ways to see Rosa over the past day or two. But what would be the point? He didn't want a relationship. And definitely not with a bitch who knew his mind better than he did. But damn it. Rosa was in his thoughts even when she wasn't around to climb inside them.

The last thing he wanted her to know was how much he ached to see her again.

Chapter Five

Her mother would be home in the next hour or so. More than anything, Rosa wished she could have the den to herself for the day. Lately having her mother hovering around her got on Rosa's nerves.

Which wasn't her mother's fault.

"Maybe you should get out and do something too." She stared at herself in the bathroom mirror.

Her long hair hung heavily, looking stringy and lifeless. "A shower wouldn't hurt either."

She had to stink worse than road kill.

"What if he showed up and saw you looking like this?"

Now that was a good joke. Rosa made a face at herself in the mirror and turned around to stare at the pale pink flower pattern on their shower curtain. If only she had more energy.

She needed an agenda, a list of things to do, something that would give her life purpose and make it worth stepping into that shower. Her cell phone rang and she jumped, then in spite of herself hurried into her bedroom and grabbed it.

Then she sucked in a breath. "Oh shit." She stared at the name on the small screen while her phone continued chirping and vibrating in her hand.

"Dimitri." She whispered his name as if that would answer the call.

Why the hell was he calling her?

Clearing her throat and hurrying back into the bathroom, she pushed the button to accept the call.

"Hello."

"Rosa." His deep baritone reminded her of their last time together, of how hard he had fucked her.

Her heart started beating faster and she touched her dirty, unbrushed hair and stared at herself as she spoke.

"Hello, Dimitri."

"Your mother and my littermate both inform me that I'm a waste of werewolf flesh."

Her cheeks seemed tight when she grinned. "Oh really? Is this something they tell you often?"

"Do you like this pack?"

She stiffened and then turned quickly from her mirror and shed her clothes. "Don't call and threaten me, wolf man."

"It's not a threat. Not at all." His tone softened, making him almost sound sincere. "I mean it. Imagine the pack's reaction if word is sniffed out that their leader is anything other than completely honorable."

"That would be bad." Now that she understood where this conversation headed, she didn't like it. "Of course, if you are honorable, then I can't imagine anyone I know speaking ill of you."

"Cut the crap."

"No. You cut the crap." She stamped her bare foot on the floor, and in spite of the childish action, she enjoyed the hell out of how it felt. "I can't help the fact that I have the gift any more than you can control being a cruel asshole."

Suddenly she felt better than she had in days. She bent over the tub, turning on the hot water and let it run for a minute to warm up.

"You've known that I have the gift as long as you've known me. If you despised that fact about me yet fucked me anyway, then I would have to agree with my mother and your littermate. You have no honor."

She hung up and wanted to leap for joy. The depression that ate at her for the past few days lifted and took one hell of a heavy load off her shoulders.

There wasn't a werewolf out there who impressed her more than Dimitri. But damn him for bringing her to such a low point. Adjusting the temperature of the water, she pushed back the shower curtain and decided a hot bath was in order. And for good measure, she would soak in some of her scented bath salts. Then she would do her hair and her face and put on the sexiest outfit she owned.

Her mother always told her she was one of the most desirable single bitches in the pack. Why the hell should she hide around the pack waiting for one stubborn, pain-in-the-ass werewolf to notice her?

If throwing herself at him, offering him every bit of her, making her scent so incredibly obvious and then letting him have her, didn't work, nothing would.

Dimitri's issues were his problem. Let him figure them out. Rosa wouldn't miss out on life while she waited for him to quit smelling his own self-loathing.

She put the stopper in her tub and then poured a generous amount of lavender-scented bath salts into the tub. Stirring it around with her toes, she waited for the tub to fill a few inches and then climbed in.

"Damn him." She realized she still gripped her phone in her other hand and let go of it. It floated through the air to the bathroom counter. "Somehow you will like me for who I am, wolf man."

Everyone else in the pack seemed to like her fine. The water filled the tub and steam surrounded her. She inhaled the relaxing scent and sunk into the hot water. Her hair

floated around her and she closed her eyes, wishing the wonderful warmth would soothe her brain as well as her body.

"And if they do like me, then there must be something worth liking," she reasoned, knowing already that it was true.

She was a likeable bitch. In spite of her pity party over the past couple days, her self-esteem wouldn't be ruined by one encounter and some incredibly hot sex.

So maybe she did crave another opportunity to ride Dimitri, have him pound her insides until she exploded and came so hard she wouldn't be able to breathe.

"Crave, hell," she mumbled and then sunk underneath the water. It would take a lot of willpower on her part not to beg for one more shot with that virile werewolf.

Straightening in the tub, she parted her hair and blew water out of her mouth. Then reaching for her shampoo, she poured an ample amount onto her head and felt it creep down her hair as she secured the cap on the bottle and returned it to the side of the tub.

Rosa lathered her hair, adjusting the water so that it was even hotter. The steamy water smelled wonderful mixed with her bath salts and the scent of her shampoo. There was nothing better than perfume to help lift her mood.

She rinsed her hair, applied conditioner and then soaped up her body. If only there were another halfway-decent werewolf out there to get her mind off Dimitri. Her mother had told her that Rosa's only problem was that she didn't have a mate. And until she found him, her restlessness would never subside.

It was in their nature—she'd heard the same explanation time and again. Werewolves were meant to mate, not to run alone.

Six months ago her small den moved here, excited to join the first Malta werewolf pack in America. Rosa was twenty-seven years old. Most of her adult life was nomadic. That wasn't how werewolves lived. They made dens, stuck with a pack. Now that she had her pack, it was only instinctive that she would want her own den.

But where would that leave her mother?

Already she knew the answer to that one. Eagerly waiting for grandcubs—she heard it as if her mother spoke aloud next to her.

Rosa turned the faucet all the way over, draining what little hot water was left into her bath. Her thoughts drifted with no direction. Which would get her nowhere.

By the time she was out of her bath, dressed and her hair combed out, her stomach growled with enough ferocity that there was no ignoring it. Her lack of appetite over the past couple days—ever since she heard Dimitri's regretful thoughts—finally took its toll. Fresh kill sounded real damned good.

"What are you doing?" Rosa asked her cousin Dante, after calling Juan and getting no answer. "I need to talk to you about something."

"I'm in Valle with my mate. Have you heard the latest? Our pack leader actually went into the WA office. With that foul stench he hauls around with him, we'll be lucky to still have any territory by nightfall."

"Dimitri would kill for his pack," Rosa snapped instantly. She hated Dante's foul attitude toward Dimitri. And he accused Dimitri of a lousy smell. "But no, I hadn't heard that he went there. I'm sure it was to make them see how they need to support us, not send us running."

"You defend the werewolf as if you were mated to him." Dante chuckled and his mate, Moira, said something in the background.

"Like that would ever happen." She wouldn't let Dante bring her down. Maybe she should just sniff out Juan. Dante taught her the gift and Juan knew nothing about it. As much as she wanted to learn how not to hear thoughts, just hanging out with one of them sounded good too. Dante's grudges against Dimitri pissed her off at times though. Right now it would take nothing for her teeth to grow if Dante wandered around in her mind. "Never mind, Dante. I shouldn't have called. Do you know where Juan and Erin are?"

There was silence on the other end of the line for a moment. If anyone could hear thoughts through phone lines, it would be Dante. Although Rosa knew that was impossible, she cleared her mind anyway and waited for him to respond.

"Drive into Valle. Meet us at the Eat and Greet in thirty minutes. We'll be waiting for you." Dante hung up without saying goodbye.

And if she blew him off and didn't show up, he would sniff her out. Single bitches didn't run around without their dens knowing their whereabouts. Now she had to go see him.

Rosa finally reached Erin on her cell while driving into Valle, the closest town to their pack and a small community made up almost entirely of American werewolves. Erin and Juan agreed to meet at the Eat and Greet as well. Hopefully the small gathering would do her some good.

Erin greeted her with a warm hug inside the rather crowded restaurant. "I'm so glad you decided to get out of your den," the bitch whispered into her ear before letting her go. "Please tell me my littermate didn't do anything terrible."

"No. Of course not." Rosa reached for her chair and caught Moira and Dante watching her carefully. "Please tell me that isn't what the pack grapevine is spreading."

If so, then Dimitri calling her this morning and complaining would have been justified.

"What's this?" Dante grabbed the edge of the table and everyone's water sloshed and spilled. "I'll kick that fucking werewolf's ass from here to the next country."

Moira grabbed his arm, but didn't have the strength to keep him in his chair.

"What happened?" Juan demanded.

"You won't touch him!" Rosa ignored the curious stares and sudden pungent smells of anger and concern that filled the air. American werewolves sat at tables surrounding them and the last thing she needed was for word to spread in their pack

that something was wrong in hers. She hurried around the table to her cousin. "Dante, please. You don't know everything."

"I will in a minute. Sit and start talking."

"Most of it is none of your damned business." She took the seat next to him, determined that with Moira's help she could keep her cousin from doing something stupid.

"Nothing I do is stupid," he growled, reluctantly sitting. His muscles bulged larger than they should in his human form.

She needed to quickly appease him or there would be trouble.

"What is going on?" Erin hissed, looking very nervous.

Rosa stared at her friends around the table. All of them worried about her and she should be very grateful that she had such a network of care and love surrounding her. She didn't like the atmosphere though. Dimitri would have a cow if he heard she shared anything personal about them and American werewolves overheard and formed their own conclusions. Pack grapevines could be brutal, no matter the pack.

A young waitress showed up, offering ice water and menus to the new arrivals. Rosa smiled at her and waited to respond to Erin until the young bitch was hopefully out of earshot. All the thoughts hitting her from so many werewolves in the establishment made it really hard to think straight.

"This isn't the right place," she suggested, lowering her voice and reaching for her water. The tablecloth had a damp circle underneath the moist glass and she placed the cup back on it after downing a good portion of the water. "Could we eat first? And then yes, I do want to talk to all of you." She looked into her older cousin's concerned and angry expression, then glanced across the table at Juan. "And I need your advice and help."

Juan smiled at her, always the caring littermate that she never had. "Real good idea, cousin. Let's chow and then get out of here."

The waitress showed up at that moment, proof that they were being eavesdropped on, and took orders. Food showed up fairly quickly and Rosa fought not to devour everything on her plate greedily.

She also took advantage and changed the subject, hoping new conversation would calm the aggression she still smelled strongly on Dante.

"Tell me what you heard earlier," she said with her mouth full of steak. "Why did Dimitri go to WA?"

That son of a bitch hurt you. I'm going to kick his scrawny ass. Dante wasn't going to drop the subject. He just moved it to his thoughts while he applied pressure to the edge of his knife and sliced his steak in half.

He didn't hurt me, and stay out of it, Dante. She scowled at him and hated the worried expression on Moira's face as she glanced from Dante to her.

"Nicolo told me earlier today that Dimitri took paperwork down there to apply for funding, get us officially incorporated so our pack can also be a town and to zone certain parts of the mountain for commercial business." Juan glanced curiously at the three of them. He didn't have the gift, but he had a life time of dealing with it with Dante.

Erin said you locked yourself in your den for a couple days. Dimitri is an ass, Rosa. You deserve so much better than him. Moira's thoughts were concerned.

He's not an ass. You just don't understand him. She argued quickly in her mind without giving what she thought much consideration.

Did she understand Dimitri?

Obviously not.

Moira raised an eyebrow, following Rosa's line of thinking. Her all-knowing expression annoyed Rosa.

"I hate it when all of you look at each other like there's a conversation going on that I can't hear." Erin gestured with her fork, glaring at all of them as her spicy scent grew around the table, drowning out the aroma from the variety of meats on their plates.

Rosa turned her attention to Erin and Juan. "I'm sorry, Erin. Do you know if WA approved Dimitri's request? The pack would benefit so much from extra funding and a few stores."

"Apparently not." Juan looked at her. "According to Nicolo, Dimitri almost took the place down."

"You don't get anywhere with the government acting like a bully," Moira said in a hushed tone with her black hair partially blocking her expression as she focused on her food.

"Didn't both of you used to work for WA?" Rosa remembered some gossip about Moira and Dante being with the government and using their gifts to help capture rogue werewolves. It sounded like a fascinating life to Rosa, but she never found time alone with either of them to ask about it.

"Not exactly." Moira waved her hand, dismissing the topic. "Dimitri's bullyish attitude won't go over well in that office though. I know that much. He will ruin our chance at advancing this pack."

"No he won't," Erin snapped, immediately defending her older littermate.

"Dimitri isn't a bully." Rosa wondered at her own willingness to defend the werewolf after taking his head off on the phone just an hour ago. She told herself the reason was obvious. Moira was wrong. "Dimitri is willing to stand up against odds that would make many males turn tail and run. He might have to get tough, but that's just because our pack has to be that way or we'll never be strong in this country."

"You're right." Erin nodded solemnly.

More like a lost cause, Dante mumbled in his thoughts, obviously not caring that she overheard his opinion of her.

Rosa stuffed the last of her steak into her mouth, then wiped the grease that dripped down the side of her mouth. She held the paper napkin to her face while chewing, fighting not to let Dante hear what she thought of him. He wasn't any better than Dimitri – equally bullying and aggressive.

"And aren't you the one who said it was Bruno's will for Dimitri to lead us?" Juan asked. He had to be almost the perfect mate, jumping to defend Erin's den even when his own den obviously disapproved of Dimitri.

"Bruno wasn't omnipotent. Anyone who thinks the gift makes them that way becomes a danger to his pack." Dante gave all of them a shrewd look. He used his steak knife to point at Erin. "Your littermate despises the gift. His inability to get over that is brewing more and more anger inside him. If he takes his anger out on werewolves down at WA, he'll ruin this pack's chances of getting any funding."

"Don't take that tone with my mate," Juan growled.

"I think something else has his hackles up this time," Erin suggested and gave Rosa a knowing look.

Everyone at the table sniffed in her direction. Rosa dropped her French fry and stared at her packmates.

"Don't any of you think for a minute that I've done a damned thing to screw with his head. I didn't make him mad. Not at all." None of them said a word but their thoughts were so loud they attacked her from all sides. "You're wrong, all of you. I didn't send him off howling." She dug into her pocket, pulled out a five dollar bill and threw it down on the table then shoved her chair back, making it screech against the floor. "I'm the one who isn't good enough for him, not the other way around."

She hurried out the door before she had a complete meltdown. And in an American werewolf restaurant, of all places. The cold air hit her in the face, instantly making her eyes water. At first she thought it her imagination that she breathed Dimitri's scent deep into her lungs. But then she looked up and stared into his dark, concerned expression.

Dimitri, Nicolo and the American pack leader Ollie Grayson all scowled as they looked at her.

Her heart stopped and she stared into dark, intense eyes that shifted in color so quickly when he focused on her that she almost missed it.

God damn. She's fucking hot! His thoughts hit her harder than the cold breeze did. And they shocked her. More than shocked her. She gaped at him, momentarily confused and then elated.

"What's wrong?" Dimitri spoke first, reaching over her head and grabbing the door so it wouldn't swing shut and hit her in the face. He sniffed the air. "Who has upset you?" he demanded.

"No one." She shook her head, hoping the slight movement would make the smell of her lie catch on a breeze and float away from the three males facing her.

Her mouth was too dry to elaborate and she shivered. It wasn't from the cold air though. Heat rushed over her, filling her with need so strong that she couldn't move.

She's leaving. Think of something – anything. Don't let her simply walk away from you. His thoughts swarmed around her, darting in and out of her brain and making it impossible to move. Dimitri didn't have a thing to worry about. If he wanted her by his side, then she would figure out a way to stay there.

Just one problem.

Dimitri hated her being in his mind. It made him despise her. Yet she just heard what he thought as if he confessed it with words.

He wanted her here with him.

"Someone has upset you. I smell it on you. Give me their name." His low growl made her heart swell painfully until it was a lump in her throat.

She stared at him. His jaw set with determination. His lips pressed together, forming a thin line. He was a lot taller than she was, with shoulders broad enough that she couldn't see past or around him. Dimitri filled her vision. His scent filled her lungs. His thoughts and emotions filled her brain. She was filled to the brim with Dimitri. And every inch of her responded to him, swelling, moisture building, need simmering. Her body prepared to take him again. She fought the urge to reach out and touch him.

"Rosa." Erin called out her name as she came up behind her and then stopped when she spotted her littermates. "Dimitri, Nicolo," she said in form of greeting.

And then Juan joined them as well. Rosa smelled him and picked up his worried thoughts without having to turn around and see him. She was surrounded by werewolves. Instinct told her to run, yet her emotions demanded that she stay right the hell where she was.

"Rosa. Come talk to me for a minute." Erin grabbed Rosa's arm and ducked around the males.

Dimitri wrapped his strong fingers around her other arm. "Go to your mate, Erin," he ordered. "Rosa will join you in a minute."

He didn't make it a suggestion. Before the words were out of his mouth, he escorted Rosa away from the group of confused and concerned werewolves. His boots crunched over the salt and sand on the cleared asphalt. Everyone's thoughts crowded in her mind, and then suddenly it was just the sound of Dimitri.

She looked over her shoulder, turning her body so that as he stopped, she almost walked into his steel chest. "They all went back inside."

"Afraid to be out here alone with me?" he growled.

"Not at all." She frowned and looked into his dark, penetrating gaze.

Or would you rather be alone with me somewhere else?

He didn't want her in his head, yet asked her questions with his mind.

It was a trick. Rosa didn't dare look away from those dark, smoldering eyes. His hard edge softened a bit. The muscles around his mouth relaxed. Finally he blew out a sigh and turned his attention to the restaurant.

"Would you want to be with someone who could second-guess your every action?"

She studied his profile, which made her insides pulse harder. "I'm not sure."

He didn't look down at her. "You're not sure."

"No. I mean, I would need to know more about the werewolf. That trait alone isn't enough information."

"I think it is." He stared down at her, looking so dangerous that another werewolf or bitch might run or turn tail and not want anything to do with him. "What if every thought you had, every decision you made, was acted upon before you announced it?"

He might be trying to intimidate her by tightening his muscles and glaring at her like he would pounce and attack at a moment's notice. Rosa wasn't daunted.

"If I cared about that werewolf, it wouldn't bother me if he knew my mind." She understood where he was going with this. He tried turning the tables, asking her how she would like it if he climbed into her head. She dared place her hand over the hard, steady beat of his heart. "If a werewolf wanted me enough to take the time to know my thoughts, I would be flattered."

Dimitri growled and grabbed her wrist, squeezing hard enough that bones pressed against each other. She wouldn't flinch from the pain.

"Silly bitch," he hissed. "Any male in our pack, in all the packs in these fucking mountains, would kill for the opportunity to have you at his side."

It hurt to yank her wrist from him, but she did it anyway. And she didn't try hiding the spiciness of her anger.

"Apparently not any werewolf," she whispered harshly and then turned from him and marched back to the restaurant.

As proof that everyone inside watched and waited, Erin darted out of the restaurant before Rosa reached the door. She looked past Rosa at her littermate, and then at Rosa.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Just peachy." She turned on a dime, wishing she could talk to her cousins but knowing now that it would have to wait. Energy ran too high in the males of her pack at the moment. Discussing this further in American werewolf territory would be idiotic. "I'm heading back to my den. I'll call you later."

Erin nodded, again glancing past her where Dimitri still stood. Let him face the wrath of his pack. She would more than likely hear from each of them later. Right now she just wanted time to regroup and get her insides under control. It sucked being so angry at a male and craving him to fill the void that pulsed inside her all at the same time.

She yanked her car door open with her mind before she reached it. She better be careful or her gift, the very thing that Dimitri obviously despised about her, would take over and get her in trouble.

Nonetheless before she could climb in, her car roared to life and almost kicked into gear and jumped forward.

"You aren't fit to drive." Dante was by her side before she even smelled him approaching.

"I'm fine," she lied.

Dante growled, taking her arm and pulling her from her car.

She did smell Dimitri approach and looked up at him, fighting the burning sensation that suddenly attacked her eyes.

"Take your paws off her," Dimitri hissed through clenched teeth.

Rosa noticed the American pack leader, and the others, watching from over by the restaurant. This was going to get bad—real bad. It was no secret that Dimitri and Dante thought very little of each other. Well that was putting it mildly. Each werewolf would love the opportunity to kick the crap out of the other.

Wouldn't it just be lovely if she gave them cause to?

"I'll take care of matters in my own den. You go handle pack matters, if you can do that without fucking it up."

Dimitri moved so fast, without giving his actions any thought beforehand. Rosa couldn't predict from his thoughts what he would do before he did it. He raised his fist and sent Dante tumbling backward with a quick, sharp blow to the side of his face.

A female screamed—probably Moira.

"You motherfucking son of a bitch," Dante spit out.

Again actions happened without thought. Rosa hardly had time to register the fact that Dimitri had punched Dante in the face—hard—when Dante sent Dimitri sailing backward across the parking lot.

Ollie and Nicolo both jumped in between the two males. Rosa raced across the parking lot, reaching for Dimitri and willing him forward so that he wouldn't fall on his ass. The look on Dimitri's face was enough to tell her that he must feel like he was being thrown around like a rag doll. First knocked backward, then yanked forward by her.

She reached Dimitri, releasing her hold on him the moment she knew he could stand on his own.

"Don't you ever use the gift in public, outside our territory, again," Dimitri told Dante with surprising control in his tone. When he pointed at Dante, his hand didn't shake. In fact, his entire body seemed poised and hard as steel. "That is, unless you don't want to have a pack."

Dante's eyes glowed silver. His hair blew wildly around him and he looked like he would leap and attack in the next moment.

"Rosa, get over here now," he ordered with a harsh coolness that about chilled her blood.

"No. Go to your den, Dante." She stood in front of Dimitri and didn't move when he walked around to stand in front of her.

Dante raised one eyebrow, not taking his attention from her. "A moment ago you wanted to talk to me."

"That was a moment ago. I don't want to talk to you now," she growled, feeling her teeth grow in spite of her efforts to remain calm and keep her wits about her.

"He's not worth it, Rosa."

"That's my choice."

"He despises what you are," Dante told her, pressing hard against the open wound Dimitri left on her soul. "You possess the gift that makes Malta werewolves so much better than any breed on this planet." He spoke quietly, stepping forward just as silently, like a dangerous predator moving with calm confidence before he attacked. "That very blood that flows through your veins turns his stomach."

"Enough," Dimitri ordered. "Don't speak my mind for me, male. Your pack leader is ordering you to your den. Disobey me and you look for a new pack."

"Don't," Rosa pleaded, hurrying around Dimitri and putting her hand on his chest. "Please. Not over me."

"It's more the truth to say you would break up our den over the likes of him," Dante told her and turned and reached for his mate, then headed to their car.

Chapter Six

His muscles ached, the change dying to leap to life inside him. Dimitri stood still, dragging the cold air deep into his lungs. He watched Dante and Juan leave with their mates. That bastard would push his last nerve one of these days. Regardless of how strong the gift pumped through Dante, Dimitri would tear the werewolf's throat out.

Rosa's pained look when he hit Dante brought him pause though. And then the words Dante spoke to her. Telling her that Dimitri despised the very blood that ran through her annoyed him worse than some of the out-of-line comments the asshole had made in the past.

And it wasn't true.

"Good job handling the matter," Ollie Grayson told him, walking up with Nicolo behind the American pack leader.

Dimitri knew Ollie liked Dante and spoke out of professional courtesy only.

"I apologize on behalf of my packmates for the outburst in your territory."

Ollie nodded his head once and then looked like he might say something about Rosa. Instead, he crossed his arms, giving Dimitri his full attention. The werewolf didn't smell angry—in fact, if Dimitri were to guess, he probably didn't give a rat's ass that Dante and Dimitri almost went at it in his parking lot. The pack leader had other things on his mind.

"What is this I hear about you visiting Werewolf Affairs?" Ollie wanted the details, as would any pack leader if his neighboring pack were in contact with the government.

"I wouldn't get your tail bent over any surprise inspections." Dimitri didn't feel like sharing the details of how those pompous assholes practically chased him out of their office. "I just dropped off some paperwork."

"Mind if I ask what for?"

Yeah. He did mind.

Nicolo shifted from one foot to the next, casually moving closer. Probably because he felt he might have to jump in and save his younger littermate. Dimitri didn't feel like dealing with that either.

"Just turning our pack into a town," he said nonchalantly, then ignored Ollie when he would have pressed with more questions. Dimitri turned his attention to Rosa, who seemed overly concerned with the ground. "I'll follow you to your den."

She looked up, her large brown eyes moist and glowing, as if she fought tears. If she did, something told him it was because so many emotions swarmed inside her and she didn't want all of them smelling her. If that were the case, she succeeded. Rosa nodded

her head once. She walked over to her car and then pulled her door open, this time using her hand.

Dimitri followed Rosa to her den, but didn't go inside. His cell phone rang as he stopped his truck in front of her place.

"It's Juan Anthony." Nicolò handed the cell over after glancing at the small screen.

"Yes," Dimitri answered, staring out his windshield when Rosa parked her car in her drive and then got out.

The cold breeze caught her hair and she wrapped her fingers around it at the base of her neck and stared at him.

"How is Rosa doing? She won't answer her cell." Juan seriously sounded concerned.

"She just arrived at her den, and she's fine."

Juan sighed. "My mate reminded me of a similar situation like what happened outside the Eat and Greet. She brought up the time you beat the crap out of me when I wouldn't leave Erin alone."

Dimitri flashed back to that time, almost a year ago, and how desperately he fought to keep his youngest littermate, his only sister left, from becoming part of Juan's den. It was a fight he lost. Erin sniffed after Juan until she snagged him. Nothing stopped the little bitch, no matter how hard he fought to talk sense into her.

"I'm not chasing after your cousin," Dimitri told him honestly, watching Rosa endure the cold as she continued watching him.

"And I didn't chase after Erin."

Dimitri heard Erin squeal in the background and then say something in a low, cool tone that Dimitri couldn't pick up over the phone.

"Your point is made. I'm sure if you call Rosa, she will answer." He told Juan he would talk to him later and hung up the phone, then got out without saying anything to Nicolò. "It's cold out here. Head inside and answer your phone when your den calls to check in on you."

She looked surprised but then glanced at his cell phone in his hand. "Who were you talking to?"

"Juan. He reminded me of the time I kicked his ass and about killed him when I found him with Erin."

She chewed her lip, probably to hide a grin, although he smelled her amusement. "I've heard that story a couple times."

"I'm sure."

"None of them should fight for me. I'm not their littermate."

"That doesn't mean they don't care." He wouldn't tell her that Dante didn't fight over just anyone. He wasn't in the mood to say anything nice about the werewolf.

"I went into Valle today to talk to Dante and Juan." She paused, searching his face but then glancing past him at his running truck. Her expression wasn't the same as it usually was. Her scent distracted him, her lust and the smell of lavender a damn appealing combination. But her face almost looked strained. "When I was fifteen, Dante taught me how to use the gift. I have plenty of memories of being a cub without knowledge of the gift or what it could do."

"Why did you want to talk to them?"

"Because you told me to figure out a way to not hear your thoughts." She shook her head and then brushed a thick strand of hair over her shoulder. "I'm trying, Dimitri. God. I swear I'm trying. But it's like trying to remember not to breathe or blink. I went into Valle to ask them if they could help me to quit using the gift."

"What?" He simply stared at her, not sure if he heard right.

She didn't smell insane, but maybe something that happened to her before she arrived in the mountains pushed her over the edge and it wasn't obvious.

Rosa moved closer, looking up at him and placing her hands flat against his chest. "You need me, wolf man. And I want you. If you can't take me the way I am, I'll do what I can to get the gift out of me."

He gripped her wrists, obviously needing to shake some sense into her. "Like hell you will. No one possesses the gift and then wants to get rid of it. Keep talking like that and I'll tell your mother to give you a full physical."

She relaxed her arms and he held her hands between them. Her wrists were so slender, her skin so soft. The gift was the only protection this female had. And as good as she smelled, as incredibly fucking hot as she was, Rosa needed protection. He wouldn't always be able to be there to watch her.

"Possessing the gift is nothing if it keeps me from having what I really want."

"Why do you want me so much, Rosa?" That was one thing he seriously didn't get. "I'm a real asshole. Ask anyone."

When she smiled, his heart about melted. Heat sank inside him, hardening his cock. The pain from it stretching inside his jeans made it damned hard to concentrate on anything other than figuring out a way to be inside her again – and soon.

"If you were an asshole, you would fuck me and then mock me for wanting more of you. Is that what you're doing, Dimitri?"

"There's nothing about you to mock. But that doesn't prove I'm a good male. Who I am can't be changed. And for now, making the world around us see that Malta werewolves are a powerful and honorable breed will take someone who can handle it rough, take it hard and not be crushed by the cruel blows we will inevitably face."

Her soft, almost tan eyes smoldered with enough heat to warm the space between them. She pushed against him, pressing their hands between their bodies, and gazed up at him with more affection than any bitch had ever shown him. It damned near made him dizzy.

"You're right," she whispered. "You're a perfect pack leader. I have no doubts. But you are hard, ruthless and capable of taking nasty blows because you care. Just as you care and want me. I'm sorry Dimitri, but you aren't an asshole."

God help him. He was going to kiss the bitch. He shouldn't. The last thing she needed was encouragement. As he lowered his head, brushed his dry, cold lips over her moist, warm mouth, he searched for the words, for a way somehow to convince her that she didn't see him as he truly was.

Dimitri didn't want to hurt her. Hell. Right now he wanted to make her feel real damned good. But it wasn't fair to Rosa for her to stare blindly at him. He was truly clueless why she wanted him so badly. Although more than once in his life, a bitch had told him he looked good, that sex appeal disappeared after the tragedy in Malta. Everything that was loving and caring vanished the day his pack, his den, his sire and mother burned to their death.

Somehow Rosa freed her hands from his and wrapped them around his neck. She pulled his head down closer, deepening the kiss. Her body pressed against his, stretching and relaxing so that he felt every inch of her. He gripped her ass, lifting her slightly and allowing her to feel how hard he was. She groaned into his mouth, letting him know without words that even through their clothes, she wanted what he had to offer.

Dimitri broke off the kiss but was unable to let her go. Resting his chin on top of her head, he opened his eyes and stared at her tidy den behind her. It was a den filled with love, tended to by a bitch with more compassion and decency than he deserved.

Letting go of her, he turned slightly and glanced at his truck. Nicolo spoke on his cell phone and glanced his direction when Dimitri looked at him. Son of a bitch. He swore he saw understanding in his older littermate's face. It was as if Nicolo knew how painful it was having his insides turned upside down with need for a bitch who, if he were smart, he would chase away.

Sometimes he wondered how smart he actually was.

Dimitri poured coffee the next morning and then blew on it, watching as his breath formed a cloud over the coffee mug. There wasn't time to mess with building a fire, not if he were going to head down to the WA office. It was a task he wasn't looking forward to but that couldn't be delayed. He told them yesterday that he would be in first thing today. Not showing up would discredit him further in their eyes.

And that was the first thing on his list to take care of. Those werewolves down at that office would learn to respect him. It was the only way they would acknowledge the strength of Malta werewolves. He was the example for all of them.

Gulping down half his cup, he then refilled it and headed in to grab his coat and start the truck to warm it up. It would be a hell of a lot easier to get to the bureaucratic office if he simply let the change rip through him and headed across the mountain in his fur. Maybe if werewolves spent a bit more time running in their fur and living the way

they were meant to be instead of demanding forms be completed in triplicate, then Dimitri wouldn't have to go face the stench of too many suppressed emotions this morning. And all so that his pack could have decent roads and a store or two to call their own.

He pulled his coat off the large nail in the wall, hammered in there in lieu of the coat rack that he parted with when Erin wanted it for her den. He stuffed his arms in the sleeves and pulled open his front door.

"It's colder than fucking hell out there." Bruno Tangaree strolled into his den with his own coat unbuttoned and his relaxed state making him appear anything but cold. "Probably be best to let that truck of yours run for a while. I'll get the fire going."

Bruno walked past him to the fireplace and stared at it while the lid to the wood box opened and several logs floated through the air and into the fireplace. Dimitri reached for his doorknob several times before grabbing it. He definitely needed more coffee.

"Bruno," he managed, his mouth suddenly incredibly dry while his heart pounded a mile a minute in his chest. "What are you doing here?"

Bruno waved his hand in the air without turning around. "Listen to you. Back in my day a den knew how to be hospitable. Go start your truck."

A lot of snow melted the day before and the slush froze overnight. Dimitri fell on his ass the minute he stepped out of his den. Served him right. Maybe slamming his body against the hard ground would shake everything back into place in his fogged brain.

The truck started right up and he managed to keep from falling like a clumsy idiot as he made it back inside.

"Bruno." Dimitri shrugged out of his coat and then dropped it on the side of his couch. He needed to understand what the hell was going on here. "You're supposed to be dead. I need to know. Are you or aren't you?"

A wonderfully large fire burned furiously in his fireplace. Bruno made himself comfortable in the overstuffed reclining chair next to the fire. His white hair was brushed straight back and his smooth, shiny cheeks implied he had shaved this morning. Dimitri couldn't smell anything from Bruno though, not even aftershave. If he didn't see him sitting there, he wouldn't know he was in the room.

The old werewolf had slipped out of his coat, and it lay on the floor next to the chair. For a werewolf his age, he still looked large and threatening, even as he reclined easily in Dimitri's favorite chair.

"Now that's a question I can handle." The old werewolf chuckled easily, appearing very much at ease although something in his expression suggested he could still manage to rough up a room if need be. "Renee and I burned with most of our pack. The gift offers many blessings in life. And since we're obviously still needed, we're here."

It was on the tip of Dimitri's tongue to ask why Bruno thought he was still needed. The question would be insulting, and he forgot about it anyway when Renee walked into the living room from his kitchen.

"Look at you, Dimitri. No wonder she is so desperate to have you. Last time I saw you, you were barely grown." Renee clasped her hands together, looking as proud as if she had whelped him herself.

"And you don't look any different than from when I saw you last." When he was a cub, there was no prettier bitch in the pack than Renee—well, other than his own mother.

Renee still possessed the grace and elegance that a queen bitch should have, kind of like Rosa. He stiffened, unsure of the direction of his thoughts.

Renee smiled and he swore her face glowed. She walked past him and stopped behind Bruno, resting her hands on his shoulders and staring at the fire. Even the flames seemed to dance more, trying to keep her attention. Just as Bruno looked fit and capable of putting in a good fight, Renee's figure still looked slim and shapely. She didn't wear a coat, and her long-sleeved sweater ended at her waistline. The jeans she wore hugged her firm ass and showed off long, slender legs. It amazed the hell out of him how youthful both of them appeared.

"Bruno thought it would help if I visited with you," Renee began, looking over at him. "You're trying so hard to better our pack. We both see that."

"Thank you," he mumbled, shocked actually that they thought he was doing a good job. Certainly they would appear before him only if he were fucking things up.

Renee laughed quietly, an incredibly melodic sound. He didn't smell humor on her—in fact, now that he thought about it, he didn't smell emotions of any kind on either one of them at all.

"We mean that. You are a very good pack leader. That isn't why we're here. The matter is more personal. And that always was my area of expertise."

"She's trying to say I'd just chew your ass and be done with it," Bruno grumbled.

Dimitri stiffened. Chew his ass about what? He didn't dare ask.

"You plan on going down to that government office again today. Now you and I both know you're going to end up in a fight. That isn't going to help, Dimitri."

He stared at Renee, unsure what to say.

"You've got the gift willing to help you. Don't be too stubborn to accept it. That always was your problem. Just like my Bruno, you have to be in charge." Again Renee laughed. This time she let go of Bruno and walked up to him. "Accept things how they are. Don't throw away the greatest asset you can offer your pack. You can do that, can't you, Dimitri?"

"Sure," he told her, not having a damned clue what she was talking about.

Renee smiled. Again her face looked like it glowed, and he actually caught himself returning the smile. Her grin broadened and she touched his arm. Her fingers were so

soft, so warm. It made him think of Rosa, with her hands on him the other day. He wouldn't dwell on her and let his dick get hard in front of these two. Bruno might take it wrong, and he wasn't sure he wanted to find out if he could battle a dead werewolf.

The two of them seemed satisfied that he had answered the way they wanted. Renee helped Bruno with his coat and then hugged Dimitri. Again warmth spread inside him that was hard to describe. It was almost like when he was a cub and just got his ass kicked, or fell and broke a bone. His mother's hugs always made everything okay with the world.

Renee and Bruno walked out the front door, closing it behind them. He turned, staring at the dancing fire. It was his only proof that they actually were in his den. It bugged him that their visit pulled suppressed visions of his life back on Malta. It was a life best not thought about. Every memory from that time simply cut him like a knife. Never would life be as wonderful and fulfilling as it had been when he lived with his den on that island.

"Damn it." What the hell was their visit about, anyway? "Like any of that made sense."

He yanked the door open. They wouldn't leave him like this. His mood turned foul, memories of Malta the one thing he knew could crush him. And they intentionally talked to him in riddles.

"Don't just leave," he yelled, but then stopped.

Rosa stood in his doorway, her hand raised in a fist as if she were going to knock.

"What?" She narrowed her brows, and her fresh scent wrapped around him like soothing medicine on a recently torn open wound.

"Nothing," he said too harshly. "What are you doing here?"

Her eyes darted back and forth and her frown deepened as she studied his face. She waited a moment too long to answer, and he knew she probed his thoughts. Growling, he backed away from the doorway. If he were smart, he wouldn't let her in. But damn it. Bruno and Renee had just visited him and the conversation left him so frazzled he wasn't sure what he was doing at the moment.

"Dimitri?" Her soft voice stroked his tortured nerves.

He realized he glared at the floor with the door to his den still open. Rosa stood in the middle of this living room, her small hands clasped together in front of her. Her frown was gone, but deep concern made her scent smell even muskier. When he looked in her direction, he caught her gaze traveling down him. She shot her attention to his face and slowly licked her lips.

"Why are you here?" he asked her again.

She straightened, which forced her jacket open. She wore a snug, knit turtleneck sweater—and no bra. Her nipples were hard little pebbles, poking against the material. His mouth went dry staring at them.

"I want to go to the WA office with you." She tilted her head slightly, lifting her chin as she did so. The way she pressed her lips together, giving him a look like her word was final, made her appear even more beautiful.

There was a passion about Rosa, more than just sexually, that glowed in her eyes, in her defiant expression and triggered something deep inside him that grew the longer he stared at her.

"Why would you want to go with me?"

She bit her lip, studied him, then turned her back to him and approached his fire. It must be his imagination. Certainly the flames didn't dance to life as she neared.

"I heard yesterday that you almost got in a fight while there." She spoke softly, slowly, definitely choosing her words carefully. "Maybe if I went with you, dealt with these werewolves who are chained to desks for you..."

She paused, keeping her back to him. A sudden strong smell of apprehension, nervousness, made her usual rich, sweet scent stir around with something salty. And then she lowered her head. Long black hair streamed over her back, falling in strands where her waist narrowed. Dimitri focused lower, enjoying the hell out of the view. Her blue jeans could have been painted on her perfectly shaped ass.

"Are you implying I'm not capable of handling the situation?" He already knew he wasn't the best candidate.

Renee's words hit him at that moment. *You've got the gift, willing to help you. Don't be too stubborn to accept it.*

Rosa turned around, her pale eyes still reflecting the glow from the fireplace. "Please don't get pissed. I swear I really am trying to stay out of your head. Someday I would love to hear about your experience with Renee and Bruno," she whispered.

She didn't want him pissed that she was just in his head. Dimitri moved closer, reaching her and then taking a strand of hair in his hand. Rosa closed her eyes, sucking in her breath. She would take his wrath or his love. Damn it.

Renee's words suddenly made sense. So much damned sense it terrified him. The only queen bitch he ever knew in his life wanted him to have Rosa. *Don't throw away the greatest asset you can offer your pack.* Rosa was definitely one hell of a catch. In fact, way too damned good for him.

"There's nothing to tell." Not when he barely understood the conversation himself. She looked disappointed, but nodded once. He preferred they discuss something a bit more grounded. "Do members of my pack think me incapable of gathering funds on my own?"

"No. God. No." She seriously looked stunned. "No one sent me here, Dimitri."

That much he believed. "Who knows you're here?"

That stubborn look returned. "I don't answer to anyone."

"That could be changed." He wasn't sure why that just fell out of his mouth, but wariness passed through him when her expression relaxed, her eyes glowed and she closed the distance between them.

"I've spent twenty-seven years being my own boss," she whispered and ran her fingernails up his arms to his shoulders. "I don't want a leash and collar."

"No bitch is going to put a collar on me either."

She laughed, the sound melodic. Her look turned mischievous when she traced lines over his flesh and then attempted to wrap her fingers around his neck. "I'm not sure I could find one that fits."

He growled and grabbed her wrists, pulling her against him and then devoured her mouth.

What was it about this woman?

No matter how much he told his brain that now wasn't the time to have a bitch in his life, she continually ended up in his arms.

"Dimitri," she whispered, her lips so soft and wet when they moved against his. "I need you, now."

He wasn't submitting to her. That was the last thing that would ever happen. But when she spoke those four little words, his cock sprang to life with enough energy that he swore he heard threads tear. His jeans were suddenly an annoying nuisance. And ripping her clothes from that hot little body of hers sounded damned appealing.

He pushed her to arm's length. "Undress," he ordered.

She stared at him with those compelling tan eyes, draped with long silky lashes, and began removing her clothing.

Her actions were so graceful, her body lithe and sensual. She shrugged out of her coat, letting it fall to the floor, and never once pulled her gaze from his. Next came her sweater. Rosa stretched as she dragged it up her body, and then her face disappeared momentarily. She held it bundled in her hands above her head as long, thick black hair tumbled over her shoulders and down her front and back.

Dimitri loved the shade of her flesh, so dark, yet with a golden hue to it that matched the radiance sparkling in her eyes. He tugged his own clothes from his body, feeling like a royal klutz while watching her undo her jeans, kick off her shoes and then push the denim down her narrow thighs.

Crap. She didn't have underwear on either.

"Did you come over here with an agenda, little bitch?" he asked, his tongue almost too thick to mouth the words.

"I had hopes," she confessed, and her cheeks turned an enticing shade of pink.

Rosa stepped out of her jeans and then stood before him, naked. There wasn't a more beautiful sight anywhere, he was sure of it. Moving toward her, he brushed his finger over her nipple, loving how the dark flesh puckered. His mouth watered at the

sight of her full, round breasts. Taking her in his arms, he leaned forward, sucking and nibbling on one nipple and then the other.

"Dimitri," she cried out, clawing his back with her fingernails.

Her head fell back and she went limp. Long black hair flowed toward the floor, and although Rosa's feet were on the floor, he held her in his arms. She relaxed, allowing him to position her as he would, surrendering completely.

Again the flames seemed to dance with a life of their own when he laid her down on the throw carpet in the middle of his living room. She spread her legs, dragging her fingers through her hair and then blinking as she stared up at him.

"Don't think you can make a habit of coming over whenever you want and demanding sex from me." He fought a smile, trying to sound serious when his words, and the suggestion behind it, sounded like one hell of a good idea.

"I won't," she answered seriously, and then lifted her legs, wrapping them around his torso and attempting to pull him closer. "But if you could just fuck me hard and fast... I'm sure that will take care of things."

He saw her mouth twitch, knew she played along, keeping the situation light.

"So that's all you want? My dick inside you until you have your release?"

"No." The glow returned to her eyes, and the flames behind her roared with a ferocity that almost unnerved him.

The light glowed off her caramel-colored skin. Her breathing increased while he hovered over her, drowning in her gaze. What he saw there scared the crap out of him. No bitch ever looked at him like they couldn't live without him, like he meant everything to her, as if her world would end if he weren't there to share it with her.

Deciding to give her just what she asked for, he adjusted his body, grabbing her thighs, lifting and stretching her. Dimitri positioned his cock at her entrance, surprised with how soaked she was, and breathed in her thick, ripe scent before diving deep into her heat.

Chapter Seven

Rosa screamed. She reached for Dimitri, but he grabbed her wrists, pinning her hands to either side of her, and plunged so far inside her that he nearly split her in two.

God. He filled her completely past her bellybutton. She was sure of it.

His body leaned over hers far enough that she couldn't move her legs, could barely adjust herself. He dove into her again, impaling her with his thick, long cock, and her world turned sideways. For a moment everything sparked before her eyes, then went black.

It was all she could do to capture her breath. And when she did suck in enough air to fill her lungs, she smelled Dimitri. His harsh nature, his unwillingness to open up to her. Everything about him that made him a werewolf, characteristics that were almost impossible to crack, appealed to her in a way she never thought it would.

He was stubborn, willful and arrogant. But more than that, he was vulnerable, unsure of things and so full of pent-up love and compassion that it ripped her heart wide open. She fought to focus on his face. His expression twisted with determination and lust. She loved that combination in him.

The muscles in his chest and arms bulged and flexed when he slid deep inside her. His cock stretched her wide open, caressed the many tiny muscles inside her pussy and pressed against that one spot where she craved him the most.

"Yes. Dimitri!" she said on an exhale. Twisting her wrists against his hands, she fought to break free of his hold.

More than anything she wanted to run her fingertips over those bulging muscles, feel the heat from his body and the smoothness of his skin. She breathed in his rich, musky scent and it brought out her more primal side. Her teeth grew as her pussy convulsed and clamped down on his cock. If she could hold him deep inside her, prevent him from pulling back out, she would do it.

"Is that what you wanted?" he asked, his voice deep and raspy.

"Oh yes," she sighed.

And then he quit moving. His cock pulsed inside her and he closed his eyes, not staring down at her but focusing on how she felt.

Perfect. Absolutely fucking perfect. His thoughts were in turmoil, just as hers were, but the few words that leapt out at her warmed her heart until it reached a boiling point along with the rest of her.

He began a slow, deliberate rhythm and Rosa realized her eyes were closed. She blinked, fighting to focus on him, and then lost herself in the intensity of his gaze.

"You haven't come for me yet."

"I will," she promised.

"But I love how you smell right now. You are so ripe, almost to the edge. It's an intoxicating scent."

"I'm glad you like it."

"I do." And then he pulled out of her. His cock was huge, swollen and thick, shiny from her come clinging to it. "I imagine you would taste as wonderful as you smell."

"God. Oh Dimitri. Shit." She moved her hands quickly when he let go of her wrists but wasn't fast enough to grab him before he slid down her, readjusting himself so that he was on all fours between her legs. When he lowered his mouth to her pussy, his thick black hair fell around his head, shrouding his face, and tickled her inner thighs. "This is so perfect," she uttered, turning her head to the side as she bit her lip.

His tongue stroked her, dipping inside and then lapping at her rich cream. Dimitri pressed long fingers into her legs, keeping her in the position he wanted while feasting on her oversensitive flesh. She jerked when he nipped at her, and his deep chuckle vibrated her insides.

"Perfect is hardly the word for it," he told her, almost growling when he spoke. "You taste so damned good."

"That feels so good." She almost purred.

He did things to her no other werewolf ever bothered to do. His mouth moved so gently over her pussy. His tongue darted around her clit and then pressed into it just enough to about make her pass out. She held on to his shoulders, digging in for dear life while he took his time devouring her.

A gift willing to help you. Accept it. The greatest asset. His thoughts made no sense. They were disjointed, coming at her in bits and pieces. It was like he wasn't really thinking and his mind rambled at will while his body took hers over the edge.

The pressure grew inside her. Her pussy tingled and swelled until there was no stopping her orgasm. Every muscle in her body stiffened. Her senses heightened, and for a brief moment she panicked, afraid she would change underneath him. The more natural part of her, the side relying on instinct and the urge to claim and possess, screamed for release as she exploded.

"Holy shit! I can't..." She panted so hard she could barely speak. "Don't stop."

"That's it, little bitch. Come all over me." His tongue dove deep inside her and then moved back and forth over her throbbing pussy until she thrust against him.

His grip tightened, keeping her in place when she would have leapt off the floor. She breathed so heavily that it made her lightheaded, and she gazed at him with blurred vision when he raised his head.

Rosa never saw a more satisfied grin on a werewolf. "Do I taste that good?" she whispered, her voice cracking as if she had just howled too much.

"You tell me." He moved over her and then lowered his mouth to hers.

The taste of herself on his lips brought forth the wild side in her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and then dragged her fingers through his thick hair. Their tongues danced around each other, exploring and claiming each other's mouth. Kissing him made her heart swell and throb as hard as her pussy. Dimitri was such a compassionate lover. He made her want to cry and laugh all at the same time. Such emotions rushed from him while he kissed her. Emotions he wouldn't let the world see any other time. The taste of her on his lips filled her mouth. She loved her scent on him. He raised his head and his eyes laced with silver as he watched her lick her lips and taste herself.

The ripe smell of lust filled the air so that it was all she inhaled. Already all the emotions she inhaled a moment ago were back in check. "That was incredible, Dimitri," she told him, suddenly feeling very bold. "What other hidden talents do you have?"

"No werewolf reveals all his secrets." His incredibly satisfied expression matched his serene thoughts.

She really can't find any fault in me. What will she think when she finally sees how flawed I am?

"Then I'll just have to learn about them on my own." She wrapped her legs around him before he could pull away from her.

But she didn't have to beg. He wanted back inside her as desperately as she needed him there. This time though, he entered her slowly, taking his time. He stroked her soaked pussy and she loved every sensation rippling inside her while he slowly built up the friction once again.

Rosa drowned in his attentive gaze. His eyes were so dark, such a rich chocolate color that swarmed with all the emotions that Dimitri fought so hard every minute to keep concealed. She saw his worry, his fears, the uncertainty of what grew between them and the incredible pleasure that she offered him. And when she was sure he would explode, when his cock started twitching and swelling even more inside her, he suddenly pulled out and grabbed her.

"Flip over," he instructed. "On your hands and knees. Let me show you how deep it can get."

"I doubt I can take it any deeper." But she rolled over and adjusted herself so that she knelt underneath him.

Dimitri wasted no time sliding back inside her. And he was right.

"God. It's too much." She clawed at the floor, dragging the carpet underneath her until it was wrinkled in her hands. When she realized she was fighting to get away from him, she held on to the throw rug like it was a lifeline.

But he grabbed her arms, pulling backward and knocking her off balance. The side of her face rested against the carpet and she strained to look up at him as he held her arms and kept her from raising herself back up. Then the tip of his cock nudged against part of her that had never been touched before.

Rosa screamed. Certain she would pass out, she experienced a level of pleasure that she was positive very few bitches ever lived through.

The moment he started to swell, she stilled. Not because he grew noticeably larger inside her. Not because incredibly sensitive muscles were stretched and pushed more than she'd ever experienced before.

But because of his thoughts.

They want me to have her. They came here to let me know she was arriving, and to claim her. Rosa has been offered to me. Mine.

Did he think that last word, or say it?

Rosa wasn't sure. At that moment his cock grew so much inside her that the acute pain exploded, causing every nerve ending inside her to spark to life. At the same moment, right when he came, the most intense pleasure possible pushed her over the edge—again.

Dimitri just swelled inside her, bonding the two of them together.

Werewolf tradition spoke clearly about this act of lovemaking. When a male swelled inside a female, came deep in her womb and grew to a size where he couldn't easily slide out when they were done, it meant they were mated.

Mating was for life.

She couldn't catch her breath.

"Did I hurt you?" He whispered over her shoulder.

Rosa shook her head, her voice too raspy to speak.

Dimitri let go of her arms, massaging them as she stretched out on the carpet. He moved slowly, wrapping his arms around her and offering a large, firm bicep as a perfect pillow. Her heart pattered furiously in her chest and she was positive that she would never catch her breath.

Every inch of him pressed against her backside. His rich, musky aroma wrapped around her. His arms and legs kept her pinned to him. She could lie here by his side for the rest of the day.

"Has a male ever swelled inside you before?"

"No."

"Good." *And no other male ever will.*

Her brain was in too much of a fog to be able to tell what he said aloud and what he thought.

She couldn't help grinning and tried to stop it, praying he wouldn't get mad if he saw that she smiled at his thoughts. Unless he spoke that last sentence, in which case she really should say something. The only words that came to mind were probably ones he wasn't ready to hear.

"I want to go with you." She was raw, throbbing and unsure that her legs would hold her when she stepped out of his bathroom. Rubbing her hair dry with his towel after enjoying a very hot shower, she paused when she smelled his irritation and realized he was on the phone.

"I'm the leader of this pack," he bellowed.

Rosa jumped in spite of herself. Her inner ears tickled when the female at the other end of the line yelled into the phone. Instinct demanded that her senses come to life, grow just a bit more fine-tuned. Even though it was eavesdropping, she let the change loose inside her just enough to make her hearing more acute. Every movement around her was suddenly more obvious. Dimitri walking barefoot back and forth across his living room. The floorboards underneath him squeaked from his weight. And Erin, whose voice she now recognized, lecturing him on the other end of the line.

"He called Juan. And he's livid that she isn't at her den. Her mother doesn't know where she is and he believes she is with you. Dimitri, don't be an ass. Just take her back to her den."

"I'll do whatever I damned well please with her." Dimitri smelled her standing in the doorway to the living room, sniffing quickly as he raised his head and met her gaze. A low, irritated growl escaped his throat. "I don't fear him."

"Well maybe you should." Erin hung up on him loud enough that Rosa jumped again, suddenly feeling too skittish for her own good.

She didn't need the gift to guess what was going on here. "Maybe if we left now..."

"Are you suggesting there is someone I should fear?"

Her cell phone rang and she glanced at the living room floor where her clothes were, and then up at Dimitri before walking over and picking up her jeans. She pulled her phone out and flipped it open.

"Hello."

"Rosa. This is Erin." The bitch sounded very upset. "Where are you?"

Dimitri's hardened expression was all she needed to see to know that lying wouldn't work here. She fought not to wince at the severity of his thoughts.

"I'm with Dimitri," she said, working to keep her tone calm.

"Rosa. Please. I know you don't owe me any favors. Dimitri is a stubborn pain in the ass. If you care about him at all, please. Please return to your den. Dante was just here and he's livid. Things were crashing all over the place. Maybe if he just had time to get accustomed to the idea of you being with my littermate." Erin paused and hissed through the phone as she sucked in a breath. "Would you please return to your den?"

"You have my word that Dimitri won't get hurt." The moment she said the words she understood why she shouldn't have.

Dimitri yanked the phone out of her hand and threw it across the room. "Promise me this right now." He pointed his finger in her face and his eyes glowed silver while

outrage swarmed around him, making the veins bulge in his arm and neck as his muscles grew. "You will never use that gift of yours to stop a fight that is mine."

She looked at him wide-eyed, not daring to move toward her probably destroyed phone. Her mouth suddenly went dry. "I would kill for you," she admitted, and her eyes burned with tears that she prayed wouldn't fall.

I would kill for you too. He was too stubborn to put his thoughts into words.

Instead he stared at her, fighting the thoughts and desires that attacked his senses. She witnessed the war going on in his brain and the turbulence rumbling inside him. His littermate's demands infuriated him worse than the knowledge that Dante might very well be here soon.

"You will kill no one today," he whispered, his tone so controlled it sent a chill rushing over her flesh. "Now get dressed and I'll return you to your den."

"Dimitri, please don't." Pushing him too far right now wasn't in her best interest. She saw that. "Let's just head out to the WA office."

"Going there was your idea. I never approved it."

"But I could help."

"What would you do?" His hair was tousled around his face and her scent clung to his skin, somewhat dimming the smell of his anger. But his brown eyes, still lightly laced with silver and outlined by his black lashes and eyebrows were so damned sexy. He was too good-looking for her to fear.

"The males and bitches in that government office live a life of servitude. Submitting to them would get you a lot further than demanding they belly up for you. Let me do that submitting for you. Please."

"You're not going to submit to any of them." He gave her one last hard look before turning away and combing his hair with his fingers.

Am I ready for any of her den to smell my scent embedded in her? Hell! She's showered and still she reeks of me. And God damn. She smells better than she's ever smelled. You aren't going to be able to let her go, you bastard. The last thing you need is a mate, but just look how she looks at you, how she begs to help you care for the pack. Why am I being given such a perfect gift? The last thing I can let myself do is fuck this up. But what happens when she finally sees how I really am?

Rosa quickly wiped the tear that escaped down her cheek, praying he wouldn't smell her crying and question her. He didn't want her in his mind. But how did she turn off his thoughts? They came to her like quick waves at high tide. There was no way she could outrun them. And she honestly didn't want to.

One of the logs popped in the fire, making a loud cracking sound. At the same moment, a noise that sounded like a hard, strong wind attacked the den from outside. Both of them looked at the front door at the same time. It flew open with enough force that it slammed against the wall behind it and shook the den. Rosa jumped as the vibration tickled her feet.

"Get your clothes." Dimitri sounded too damned calm, and suddenly his thoughts were under so much control she hardly heard them.

He bent down to pick up her shirt and shoes and handed them to her, pushing her backward as he did. "Go get dressed—and don't interfere." He searched her face for just a moment, looking as calm as he sounded.

His cool attitude only added to the anxiety crawling over her skin. She glanced past him just as Dante appeared in the doorway. At the same time, Dimitri shoved her hard enough that she almost tripped backward over her feet.

"Don't ever disrespect this den, or your pack leader, like that again." Dimitri cleared the distance between her and the front door with two long strides, then moved in on Dante without a shred of fear coming off him.

Rosa, on the other hand, couldn't control her nerves. She almost fell through the doorway into the bathroom as she struggled to climb into her jeans. Then she started putting on her shoe before she had both of her legs in her pants.

"Shit," she hissed, yanking her shoe off while her fingers shook worse than leaves on a tree during a nasty spring storm.

The ceramic bowl on the sink that held a bar of soap started rattling and she jerked her head up, eyeing it with growing aggravation. The gift swarmed out of control inside her just like she were some idiot cub who was incapable of controlling whether she stayed in her fur or flesh. If she didn't get a grip on herself and the gift that swelled in her veins, things would start flying. She pulled her jeans up her still-damp legs and bit her lip as she cursed. The change threatened to get the better of her too.

Hell. She was a mess. And why?

Dimitri's controlled baritone in the other room should reassure her. He didn't fear Dante. And she refused to think that maybe he should. It didn't matter that Dante had more control over the gift than any werewolf she knew. Dimitri called on Dante's honor and loyalty to the pack, and she knew both ran strong in the werewolf.

But Dante was pissed.

Dimitri had a temper too.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

She fought with her shirt and almost shredded it with her growing fingernails before she managed to pull it over her head.

"Return my cousin to me." Dante's voice boomed off the walls of the den. "I can smell her in here. Don't try to hide her."

"She's not hiding. She's dressing." Dimitri's words chilled the air.

Rosa froze and looked up as she put on her shoes. "Oh God," she moaned.

"What's going on here?" It was another werewolf.

Rosa quickly sniffed out the newcomer. His scent and voice were familiar, but her brain was too frazzled to figure out who was here.

"Where's Rosa?" a female asked.

Rosa hurried out of the bathroom and stared at Josie and his new mate, Maura, a pretty *lunewulf* she'd met a few times before.

"Rosa, we're leaving." Dante extended his hand to her, his expression chiseled in stone and the fierceness pulsing through him giving him an incredibly dangerous look.

Dimitri moved, blocking her view of Dante. "Is there a reason you two are here?" he asked Josie with a biting, accusatory tone.

Rosa flinched, knowing Josie was one of Dimitri's closer friends. She was able to see the tall, well built werewolf. His expression didn't change as he stared at Dimitri, not looking past him to her.

Instead of answering him, Josie turned on Dante. "Does the bitch look like she wants to leave with you?"

"Stay out of this, Balzon. She is my den."

"Smells to me like that might not be true." Josie's bold words made her cheeks burn furiously.

Suddenly more than anything, she wanted to run. Josie and Dante screamed at each other with their thoughts, their threats deadly and curdling her blood with their hostility and challenging words toward each other.

There is no way you're fucking mating with this bastard, Dante growled with his mind.

She ignored him. Instead she focused on Dimitri's back, fighting to hear his thoughts over the other two alpha males. The aggressive smells in the room turned her stomach and she almost jumped when a popping sound outside had her looking around the males toward the open door.

"What the fuck?" Dante growled and turned, taking long, determined strides toward the car that had parked in front of Dimitri's den.

She watched Juan get out of the car and then Dante and Juan argue in front of Dimitri's den.

"It's a damned party," Dimitri grumbled.

"Do we have something to celebrate?" Josie asked, his tone almost jovial. He glanced past Dimitri and winked at Rosa.

Dimitri growled and moved to block Josie's view of her. "If we did, you would have fucking received an invitation."

"Good to know I'm still on your invite list." Josie still didn't sound mad.

The werewolf was strange. In spite of his alpha tendencies, Josie never seemed upset about anything. Even his thoughts were calm now that Dante was outside.

"I need to send those two out of here." Dimitri headed toward his front door, then glanced over his shoulder. "Stay in here with her until I come back."

Maura moved to her side the moment Dimitri was out of the house. Josie turned his back on both of them, guarding the door and blocking their view of the males outside.

Still, the harsh aromas of hostility and intense determination drifted into the living room.

"What's going on?" Maura asked quietly, sniffing the air around Rosa the moment she was next to her.

"I wanted to go to the Werewolf Affairs office with Dimitri." Rosa glanced past Maura at the fire in the fireplace.

Flames roared around the burning logs. It was like there was a passion, like the intensity of all the emotions around them fed the fire and gave it enough life to continue raging without being attended. She gazed into the orange and red flames, feeling the strength from it.

"That's a good idea, especially now." Maura nodded, then glanced at her mate's back. When she searched Rosa's face, a soothing aroma of concern and compassion floated around her. "Have you two mated?" she whispered.

Dimitri's scent was so deeply embedded in her that even the smell of soap and shampoo wouldn't hide it. It was the deep scent that resulted from intense lovemaking, the kind werewolves did to mate. Rosa couldn't blame Maura for wanting to know. It sure smelled like they were mated.

Rosa gave her a hard look. No way would she confirm or deny a thing when Dimitri never mentioned anything about mating. His thoughts said one thing, but he hadn't voiced them. She wouldn't speak for him.

When she didn't answer, Maura glanced at the floor, then over at Josie. The werewolf had his back to them, but Rosa heard his thoughts, even though Maura couldn't. He held on to every word they said. Maura was simple to read, her mind such an open book. She guessed her mate paid attention to them as much as he did the werewolves out front.

"I just wanted to know if I should honor you as my queen bitch now or not," Maura added, then grinned and gave Rosa a hug.

"Queen bitch," Rosa muttered. "I never thought about that." She looked into Maura's concerned blue eyes and shook her head quickly. "I mean, I guess I haven't allowed my thoughts to go that far. Just honor me as your friend. That is good enough for me."

Maura grinned broadly. "You're already that. Accepting me into your pack gives me plenty to honor you for."

Dimitri wasn't thrilled at all that his older littermate and his best friend both had *lunewulf* bitches for mates. Rosa liked both bitches though. Having run around a good portion of Europe as a cub with her den, she was used to mingling with different breeds of werewolves. Rosa smiled at Maura, knowing she was a good addition to this pack.

One of the werewolves outside howled, and then there was a scuffling sound. Josie raced out of the den and Maura screamed, hurrying after him.

Rosa grabbed the back of her shirt. "Don't race out there and get yourself hurt." She pulled the struggling bitch to her as she stared out into the yard.

Chapter Eight

Dimitri itched to hit Dante again. As the werewolf stumbled backward, an incredible force ripped at Dimitri. He couldn't keep his balance. The ground suddenly raced underneath his feet at a speed too fast to keep up with—like being tossed on a conveyor belt and trying to keep his balance. He fell backward, unable to keep his feet underneath him.

Dante slowly crawled to his feet, his eyes burning with rage as silver streaks made them glow.

"Attack like that one more time and you won't have a pack," Dimitri hissed.

"I founded this fucking pack." Dante shifted his jaw back and forth, probably insuring that it still worked.

"Then don't fuck it up and lose your standing in it."

"I'm not the one crossing the line." Dante's words garbled as his teeth extended and his black hair began to grow, looking thicker and tousled. The change was about to consume him.

Dimitri's blood pumped inside him a bit too hard for his human body to handle. Changing into their fur would make this a fight to the death. He had no problem with that if he believed Dante wouldn't use the gift. But the asshole didn't know how to fight without it.

"Like hell I don't," Dante growled, hearing Dimitri's thoughts and coming at him with raised fists.

"You just proved my point." Dimitri didn't back down when the werewolf was inches from his face. He felt the heat from Dante's breath burn his flesh as he glared at him. "Stay out of my head. Turn that gift off, if you can master the strength to do that, and then we'll find out how strong of a werewolf you actually are. Are you willing to fight for your cousin under those terms?"

"Whatever it takes to keep your paws off her," Dante growled, his teeth pressing against his lower lip.

Suddenly Josie stood next to him, studying Dante while Juan took a step closer, watching all of them warily.

"Maybe the bitch wants to be with him." Josie's calm tone didn't fit into the hostile surroundings. "A werewolf fights with honor when it's clear why he is fighting."

Dante growled, growing before them as his outraged glare turned on Josie. "Like you have a fucking clue about honor, mating with a *lunewulf* after killing her mate. Hell, they called for first blood because of your so-called honor."

Josie didn't blink. Not one muscle in his body moved. Yet suddenly Dante flew backward, soaring through the air with enough speed that when he hit a large tree trunk on the other side of the road, he slid down it, his body going limp on the ground. And still Josie didn't move.

"Stop it!" Rosa ran into the yard and grabbed Dimitri's arm, squeezing it hard with her small hand. "You must stop this, Dimitri. Please. The four of you aren't fighting over me. It's deeper than that, and you know it. Do you really want to lose four good werewolves because of your differences?"

Her imploring look melted his heart. What in the hell did a bitch as perfect as her see in a werewolf like him?

Taking her hand in his, he removed it from his arm. She searched his face, trying to find the answers to her questions.

"He would have quite a lot of honor to fight for your well-being, my little bitch," he told her.

She smelled of his fireplace and of warm compassion and just a small amount of spiciness from anger. But mostly she smelled of him.

"I don't want him fighting for me," she whispered.

He understood her meaning. But didn't she see that he just told Dante he would fight him? Without commenting, simply because he wasn't sure how to word his thoughts, especially in front of Josie and Juan, he turned from her and walked over to where Dante lay slumped on the ground.

"Werewolf. Talk to me." He pushed Dante's shoulder with his boot, then slowly knelt next to him and moved his fingers to the male's neck and felt his pulse. It throbbed strong and hard. Dante simply had the wind knocked out of him. But Dimitri couldn't swear there weren't any broken bones. Glancing over his shoulder, he smelled worry and something else—possibly frustration—on the two werewolves watching him.

Josie and Juan stood in the middle of the road, silent and expressionless. But Rosa hurried to his side, her hands instantly running over Dante's body. Her touch managed to bring him to just as Maura moved to stand by her mate.

"Don't try to stand," Rosa ordered him.

Dante didn't look too with it when he gazed up at her, then looked at Dimitri.

Dimitri looked over at Josie. "You and Rosa, use your gift and lift him into the truck. Stay with him a moment, though, while I get some blankets to put under him. Juan, contact his mate and let her know you'll be bringing him to their den shortly."

His pack members nodded, and for once, no one argued with his orders. Nonetheless, a dull, throbbing headache pulsed at his temples.

Rosa didn't like being ordered to accompany her cousin to his den. She would get over it though. Dimitri would show Dante, and everyone else in her den, that he wasn't cold-hearted. Rosa did something to him. Her open desire for him, the way she looked

up at him like he was damned near perfect, ate at the wall that he always believed was permanent around his heart.

Any sane werewolf wouldn't let a bitch like that get away.

Dimitri was pretty sure that he was sane — most of the time.

Not to mention he had swelled inside her. He wasn't a werewolf to turn his back on tradition. And he could have pulled out of her, could have prevented his scent from seeping through her pores. Damn it. He didn't want to.

There would be no announcement made, though, until he talked to Rosa. Both of them would have to understand, and agree, that their mating would bond them together for life. It was something he believed she already understood. Nonetheless, the proper way to handle this matter would be to discuss all of this with her. Her cousin showing up prevented him from doing so.

It wasn't because he hesitated or wasn't sure how to broach the conversation.

Dimitri parked in front of Werewolf Affairs and stared at the simple building for a minute while trying to clear his thoughts of Rosa and focus them on what needed to be said while here.

The same bitch gave him an indifferent stare when he let the door to the place close behind him. The warmth of the office surrounded him, along with the stale smell of boredom. Rosa's words about servitude came to mind and he worked to relax his expression and his mood before speaking.

"I dropped some paperwork off here yesterday," he began.

"I remember you." The female sniffed the air then glanced back at the paperwork on her desk as if their conversation had just ended.

"Then you remember that I told you I would be back today." He knew his tone was short, and again tried to repeat Rosa's words in his head. There was only one way to get through to these werewolves. He tried for a more congenial tone. "Is there someone available right now?"

"I'll check." She didn't act like she appreciated his calmness.

Dimitri stood alone for a long time in the outer room and stared out the glass doors at the open field across the highway. It would be sunny today. The pale blue sky spread forever and the mountains provided a jagged border, with their white and gray coloring adding to the peaceful setting.

The majestic scene in front of him didn't capture his attention as much as the smells and sounds behind him did. He turned, paced the length of the small entryway, glared at the unoccupied desk and then at the doors that led to the inner offices. More than anything he wanted to barge through them and demand attention.

Territorially speaking, this office was in American werewolf territory. They would honor Ollie Grayson, the pack leader here, before him. But then they would come up

with any reason if need be not to honor his wishes. He smelled it on the bitch the moment he entered her space. Lack of trust, hatred, leeriness.

He growled at the doors then turned his back and paced again. They were intentionally ignoring him. It pissed him off.

Dimitri wouldn't give them the satisfaction of smelling anger and frustration on him.

Think about Rosa.

For months the hot little bitch flirted with him. Any time they were together in a group, she sniffed her way toward him, her desire obvious. Not once did that little bitch try covering her scent. Gossip flew – hell, a pack would howl about anything – but they also commented on his obvious lack of interest.

And that pissed more than one male off.

Dimitri was more than aware the other single males growled over the unfairness of such a stunning single bitch ignoring all of their advances. It wasn't his fault she sniffed after him and shunned the other males. They didn't understand how much work was involved in leading this pack. All most single males cared about was getting their dicks wet. There were a few, like Josie, who had his back. But even his lifelong friend didn't care to get overly involved with pack politics.

Dimitri was a government of one. Most viewed him unapproachable, an angry werewolf with a chip on his shoulder. He was a good pack leader, and he hadn't sniffed out anyone in the pack who thought differently.

But then Rosa went and flooded that little slut's den. He would give her this, she got his attention. When he marched over to her den and then took her with him in his truck, her wonderfully sweet scent somehow crept deep into his system. And it was still there.

This office was filled with stale and stuffed emotions, but he could smell Rosa on him. And her saddened expression when he told her to tend to Dante still burned in his mind. She wanted to be with him.

And he liked having her around.

But he had a job to do. Pack leaders ran alone, ahead of the rest of their pack, clearing the way, insuring their safety and giving them the best life he could provide.

They don't run alone if they have a queen bitch by their side. The nagging voice in his head would only distract him if he dwelt on it.

"Dimitri Spalto?" a male asked behind him.

Dimitri turned around, taking in the young male suffocating in his suit and tie. Who the hell decided werewolves should wear such human attire?

"Yes," he answered, his gaze wavering from the young male to the bitch who had disappeared earlier, leaving him to his thoughts here in the waiting room.

She returned to her desk, barely glancing at the males standing next to her before resuming her work.

"I hear you would like to set up an appointment to have someone go over paperwork with you."

Dimitri glared at the bitch sitting at the desk. She ran her hand over the side of her hair, possibly hiding her face from him, but didn't look up. He returned his attention to the male waiting for his answer.

"I don't need anyone to go over the paperwork with me." He would stay calm. No matter how badly he wanted to grab the werewolf by his nicely secured tie and yank on it until enough color returned to the male's face to convince Dimitri he was actually still alive. He kept his expression calm and stared into the stifled male's bored expression. "The paperwork is completed and here in this building somewhere."

"I have it," the male said, his tone fucking lifeless. The poor bastard probably hadn't had a decent hard-on his entire adult life. "Did you want to make an appointment?"

"I'm here for that appointment. And I was here yesterday. My pack needs funding."

"Most packs do."

Not like his pack did. "Most packs I've seen around here already have roads and schools and stores."

"How long has your pack been here?"

Dimitri had a feeling the male already knew the answer to that question. "About a year."

The male nodded, then reached inside his suit jacket and pulled a card from his pocket.

"Set up an appointment and we'll go over the paperwork."

Dimitri took the card. The male nodded once and then turned and disappeared behind the doors leading into the rest of the building. The female didn't look up at him.

He was being dismissed. More than likely the male walked back to the offices and strained muscles in his face to smile at his peers. He would proceed to brag about how he got rid of the Malta werewolf.

Muscles strained inside him as he fought the overwhelming urge to tear down those doors and remind the werewolves in this building what it was like to experience raw and untamed adrenaline. These government pawns forgot what it was like to live.

Worst yet, they forgot why they were here in the first place. "Make that appointment," he said to the bitch behind the desk.

When she looked up, after taking a moment to finish doing whatever it was she was doing on her computer, she looked confused by his statement.

"You want to make an appointment?" she asked.

Dimitri wouldn't let her insult his intelligence. Although she did a damned good job of insulting her own. "Just following your rules," he said, never taking his attention from her.

"Of course you are." She tapped her nails over her keyboard, making a repetitive clicking sound and then sighed loudly. "Looks like our first appointment time is June second at nine-thirty."

"Nine-thirty? And not until June?" If he didn't throw her desk across the room, it would be a damned miracle. "What kind of werewolf wakes up that early? And both times I've been here, there hasn't been another soul coming or going. You're going to tell me the first appointment I can get isn't until June?"

"Do you want the appointment time or not?"

"Fine. I'll be at that appointment."

He smashed the card between his thumb and forefinger and walked out of the building. Cold, damp air hit his face, cooling the anger that threatened to boil over inside him. His boots clunked against the cleared concrete sidewalk as he headed to the parking lot where his truck was parked.

"This is bullshit." He'd tried Rosa's path. He'd kept his cool, was fucking nice as hell to that bitch inside WA. And it had gotten him nowhere. "Fucking bullshit."

The pack would be better off if he could figure out another way to get the money needed to pave their roads. To hell with zoning. If the government didn't give a rat's ass about them, they sure as hell wouldn't take the time to come visit his pack. And if they did, and they didn't like what they saw, then maybe they would approve the zoning.

"One way or the other," he mumbled, reaching his truck.

He stopped when he realized it was running and then noticed his passenger. Pulling his driver's side door open, he slid into his seat, instantly feeling the heat blowing at him from the vents in the dash.

"Hope you don't mind," Bruno said, grinning and rubbing his thick hands in front of the vent. "This old body doesn't take to the cold like I did when I was younger."

"Can you even feel the cold?" Dimitri noticed Bruno's coat wasn't zipped up or buttoned. It hung open over the older male's thick chest.

"I can feel your anger and frustration. And I approve of your line of thinking." Bruno turned all business and stared out the front window at the small building with the incredible mountainous backdrop behind it. "Granted, it might take swallowing even more pride to go with the direction of your thoughts than to confront those stiff suits in there again."

Dimitri stared at Bruno for a moment. "The direction of my thoughts," he repeated, and then understood Bruno's meaning. "I'll come up with the money to support my pack no matter what it takes."

"I did the same." Bruno nodded seriously.

"I can find werewolves who have connections."

Again Bruno nodded. "Werewolves who have worked with the government, or who know people who have connections."

"That's right." Dimitri eased the truck into gear and backed out of his stall. More than anything he wanted to peel out of the parking lot, leave this place with the smell of his tires burning over their perfectly cleaned lot. But giving them the satisfaction of knowing they frustrated him didn't have any appeal.

He pulled out on to the highway and then gunned it. And that's when it hit him. He did know werewolves who had connections. There were members in his pack who had worked with the government, who had knowledge of how things worked behind those damned doors in WA.

"That's right," Bruno said, repeating Dimitri's words.

Dimitri gave him a hard glance, doubting very much he simply parroted Dimitri. The old male listened to every word in Dimitri's head. And he was the only werewolf who wouldn't get yelled at for doing it. Bruno pursed his lips, nodding slowly and narrowing his dark eyebrows together.

"A good pack leader checks in on his injured," Bruno suggested.

Dimitri knew he scowled when he returned his attention to the road. He slowed around an extreme curve and then kept his speed down as the road continued twisting.

"It would be a hell of a lot easier to simply strangle that werewolf with his fucking tie until he approved my funding," he growled.

"There's a thought." Bruno laughed easily. "I know you'll make the right decision." He slapped his thigh. "I think Renee is probably done with her bath by now. Time for me to get back to her. I only allow her so much time with her attendants while she bathes."

Dimitri fought real damned hard to keep the visuals out of his head from that comment. "Attendants?" he couldn't help asking.

"Not what you think, werewolf. She's got three males helping her bathe."

"You're kidding." Dimitri's jaw dropped. Bruno didn't strike him as the kind who would share, especially his mate.

Bruno winked at him. "They're all human." He burst out in a deep laugh, again slapping his leg like it was the best joke in the world. "She teased me one day saying she would bathe for hours in a hot, bubbly bath with only males to assist her. Being the gallant mate that I am, I arranged for her wish to be granted. But my precious Renee never has developed a taste for humans. Their smell gets to her after a while. So I show up and she goes wild for me. Works every time."

Dimitri laughed. And it dawned on him that he needed a good chuckle. Shaking his head, he slowed for the turn up his mountain and then realized with a glance that Bruno had suddenly disappeared.

"Have fun, you old werewolf," he whispered.

Chapter Nine

"Mom said he would be just fine." Rosa stood with her arms crossed and watched Moira fuss over her mate. "He just got the wind knocked out of him. There are a few bruised ribs and a broken wrist. Nothing a good night's sleep won't fix."

"They all have to prove they are the best," Moira growled, punching a throw pillow a bit harder than necessary before pulling Dante forward by his collar and then stuffing it behind his head.

Dante actually showed he had enough good sense not to comment. Even his thoughts were rather subdued. Rosa couldn't believe Josie sent Dante flying so hard. She had a feeling a grudge had built between the two of them for just a bit too long.

Moira was obviously perturbed that she had to sit and wait most of the afternoon before she could get her hands on her mate. Rosa searched for something reassuring to say, and to keep her thoughts from passing judgment on any of the events that led to Moira's rather mangled mate.

"We're lucky to be surrounded by so many powerful and good werewolves." It was the best she could come up with. After fetching whatever her mother needed for the past few hours, she wasn't topnotch with quick comebacks.

Moira voiced the obvious. "Dante and Josie have had it out for each other since they both settled here. You would think a few alphas with the gift could live alongside each other, but I'm starting to wonder."

"If it's any consolation, Maura and Josie stopped by our den to check on Dante before you arrived."

"Maura probably made him," Moira said, grunting in a very unladylike fashion and glaring at her mate.

"Maura is a good bitch."

"Behind every good male is an even better bitch." Dante spoke for the first time, looking humbly at his mate once she made him more comfortable on the couch with tons of pillows.

It was the first time he spoke out loud. For the most part, Rosa fought to ignore his rambling, drug-induced thoughts. Her mother gave him way too many pain meds. Dante repeatedly praised Moira in his head, speaking to her in his drugged-up mind as he promised to make love to her for hours as soon as they were alone. Rosa knew Moira didn't mind her being here. Dante wouldn't be doing anything sexually for a while—at least not for the rest of the day.

Werewolves healed fairly quickly, but with the medication in his system, Dante would more than likely sleep the rest of the day away. It amazed Rosa that her mother

could get so many good drugs to treat the pack with, yet Dimitri had to pay hell a high price to get any help in building a town for their pack.

She leaned against the wall, staring in the direction of Moira and Dante. When her thoughts lingered on Dimitri for a while, her heart swelled painfully. She wished she knew where he was right now. Certainly it wouldn't take him all day at Werewolf Affairs. But did his visit go well? Would the pack finally be able to start building roads, or stores and maybe a school? There was plenty of land on the mountain for more dens to settle. And they would if Malta werewolves had a proper town to offer them.

"Let's get some supper started," Moira suggested, smiling as she walked toward Rosa. "No reason for you to return to your den and stew about that werewolf of yours all evening."

"I'm sorry my thoughts are so depressing." Rosa spent enough time with Moira and Dante since she moved here to feel somewhat accustomed to all of them hearing each other's thoughts.

"We're all worried about the pack getting decent funding." Moira patted her arm and then glanced over her shoulder when Dante whined in his thoughts that he was being ignored.

I'll be back in a few minutes with food for you. Just rest, wolf man. She stared at Dante when she spoke to him in her mind, but then winked at Rosa when she walked past her toward their kitchen.

"So you don't know how Dimitri's visit went at WA?" Moira asked once they were out of the bedroom.

"I haven't talked to him." She stared out the kitchen window, surprised to see that it was almost dark. "I'm not sure what he's doing right now."

"He'll be here," Moira said quietly.

Rosa snapped her head up and gave Moira a quick, sharp look.

"No, no." Moira laughed and held her hand up defensively at Rosa's thoughts. "It's not the gift telling me he'll be here. It's more like a bitch's intuition. Just from sniffing the werewolf out. He may play rough and tough and all that stuff just like the rest of them. But it matters to Dimitri where you are and what you're doing. And...he's male. He's put his mark on you. I can smell it. He'll sniff you out because he cares about what is his."

"What is his," Rosa repeated, trying the thought on for size. Since she joined this pack, the sensation of finally being home created a need for something else deep inside her. Rosa knew once they were here that it was time to create her own den. She knew that the moment she first smelled Dimitri. "It's taken forever to get him to think that way."

Moira's laugh made her whole face light up. "Trapping a werewolf is just about the hardest thing to do."

"I don't want him feeling trapped."

Moira waved her hand in the air. "You know what I mean."

Rosa nibbled her lower lip, staring at Moira as she busied herself preparing food for her mate. She didn't pay attention to Moira's actions though.

She wasn't trapping Dimitri, was she?

Granted, she'd chased after him after settling into this pack. But Rosa always chased after what she wanted. It was in her nature. Any decent bitch sniffed out the best there was when building her den. The longer she tracked him, the more she believed Dimitri was meant to be her mate.

So he was thickheaded. He had a few issues. He did what he wanted without offering any explanation. Dimitri didn't need anyone's approval. Which made him a damned good pack leader. And an even harder male to pin down.

But she didn't rape him. Not once did Rosa ever rub her body against his, tell him to his face that she needed him to fuck her. That's the way sluts behaved. Rosa almost caught herself growling when she pictured Tonya strutting around Dimitri with her tail in the air, practically begging him to mount her. The little bitch got what she deserved, and Rosa would go after her in a second if she caught her sniffing around Dimitri again.

Realizing her thoughts were stinking up the room, she faked a cough, hoping a growl didn't actually escape her mouth and gave silent thanks when her cell phone rang. Moira didn't voice her comments over Rosa's thoughts but instead watched Rosa dig out her phone.

"Hello," she said when she recognized Maura's number.

"Hi there." Maura, Josie's *lunewulf* mate, spoke quietly into her phone. "Where are you?"

"Over at Moira and Dante's den."

Maura sighed. "I would be growled at for sure if I said that Josie feels bad for attacking Dante. He should though. I told him they were both acting like cubs."

Rosa was able to smile. Maura was a good bitch. She acknowledged her male's imperfections but stood by him nonetheless. Just as any female would do.

"I just hate that they fought because of me."

Moira looked up from her task of cutting meat, her worried gaze shooting toward the direction where Dante was. *Don't upset him with your thoughts or conversation, Rosa.* This was Moira's den. Rosa nodded once, understanding the mental command that she behave and not annoy her cousin.

"It wasn't because of you. Josie doesn't like Dante. He feels the werewolf resents Dimitri for being pack leader, even though Dante never entered the challenge to lead the pack."

"That's reassuring." Rosa tried not to let her thoughts linger on what Maura had just told her. Not that she would keep secrets from this den. After all, they were all the den she and her mother had – no matter they weren't whelped from the same litter. But

the challenge for the right to lead the pack happened right after Rosa moved here, and the hostility that finally exploded between Josie and Dante stemmed back to that time.

Rosa remembered Dante not entering the challenge. Josie didn't fight to be leader either. This wasn't about leading the pack. Moira was right. This was about two alpha males who were blessed with a strong dose of the gift. It would take strong bitches to maintain alphas like that. Was she strong enough to walk by Dimitri's side?

"The reason I called though was because Josie just headed over to Dimitri's den. Something happened today that pissed Dimitri off. And not the fight. Josie gets all quiet about things until he sorts them out in his head. It pisses me off sometimes, but if I push him, it just takes him longer to tell me what is on his mind. I thought maybe you could do some sniffing around for me. I just hate it when Josie takes off with Dimitri and I don't know what they're doing."

"I could probably do that."

"Oh Rosa, you're such a good friend."

Rosa could feel her happiness even if she couldn't smell it or hear Maura's thoughts. When she hung up her phone, she fought to keep her thoughts calm so that Moira wouldn't give her the third degree.

Moira had a plate ready for her mate and held it in front of her while studying Rosa. *You're fighting awfully damned hard to keep your thoughts from me*, the bitch accused.

You told me not to upset your mate. Rosa offered her a small smile. "I'm going to take off for a bit, but I'll check back in a few hours. Hopefully Dante will be up and moving around by then."

"You know you're not supposed to run without an escort." *Although I'm not sure at the moment if you're a single bitch or not*. Moira smiled understandingly. "Just answer your cell phone if Dante calls you or he'll be on a warpath all over again." Moira put the plate down and then gave Rosa a quick hug. "I won't order you to stay away from Dimitri, but just keep in mind that Dante fights for you because he wants you to have the best. If he doesn't approve of Dimitri, there might be a good reason."

Rosa nodded and left the den quickly. She didn't want Moira hearing her thoughts at that moment. Dante might simply be jealous of Dimitri. And there would be no changing that. Rosa knew what she saw and what she smelled. There wasn't a better werewolf out there than Dimitri. And right now, she was going to find out what he was doing.

Her phone rang again, and this time it was her mother. "Tell me you're heading home and that I didn't fix all this meat so that it would go bad."

Maria Anthony was a professional at applying a good guilt trip. "Why did you fix so much food? You knew I was here with Dante and Moira."

"And Moira can take care of her own mate. Come home to your mother. Soon you'll have your own den and I'll be all alone. Spend time with your mother while you are still single."

Rosa growled, this time not caring if her mother heard it through the phone. "Okay. We wouldn't want your meat to go to waste."

"That's my good Rosa."

Going home proved to actually be a bit more productive than Rosa thought it would be. Halfway through their meal, she leaned back, staring at her mother who grinned at her, looking very pleased with herself.

"You don't give an old bitch enough credit. Don't you think I want to see my daughter happy? And being the mother of our queen bitch would be a rank I could live with." Maria puffed out her small chest, beaming, and then returned to the topic of their conversation. "Now. As I was saying. After I tended to Dante, I went down to the bottom of the mountain to see what good trade was going on at the trucks. It will be such a good thing when we actually have buildings for stores. These old bones get chilled so easily standing outside in this cold mountain air."

"We'll have them soon. Now tell me more about what you heard."

"Of course, my dear. As I was saying, apparently Dimitri was shot down again at the Werewolf Affairs office. Word is out that he is considering other means to get the money to build our roads and stores."

"What other means? Dimitri isn't a dishonest werewolf."

Maria shook her head quickly, then stuffed her mouth with meat and chewed while waving her fork at Rosa. "And don't you think I wasn't the first one to argue on his behalf, my dear." Her teeth grew slightly so she could chew the meat and her canines remained longer when she continued speaking. "But you know Dante might have some connections that would help Dimitri. And Dante is your first cousin. Blood runs thick in our den and we help each other even if it means swallowing our pride."

"What are you saying? That I should ask Dante to help Dimitri?" Rosa's heart started thudding in her chest. She couldn't catch her breath as excitement mixed with nervous fear. "You know I would do anything to help Dimitri. But what if he doesn't want that kind of help? You know he doesn't like Dante."

Maria shook her head and leaned back, patting her full belly and staring at her daughter with large, watery brown eyes. "And you will always honor and respect every member of your den until the day you die. But don't think your mother doesn't know where your heart lies. I can smell that werewolf on you and I know a mating is moments away for you two. Dimitri is an honorable werewolf. He will have you. There is nothing wrong with talking to Dante, smoothing the path so to speak."

"I'm not sure a path can be cleared for those two." Rosa's stomach twisted and she couldn't eat another bite. "It would be easier to clear a path for new roads."

"Silly little bitch. The paths are cleared. We need the tar and pavement. The bricks and mortar. Can your gift create such physical items out of air? I don't think so. But you can argue with a stubborn werewolf and know his thoughts before speaking your mind."

"If it were only that easy." Rosa knew better than to explain the limitations of the gift to her mother. When Maria Anthony wanted to believe the gift would move a mountain, she would damned well believe it. And they thought males were stubborn.

Later, when Maria thought Rosa was heading out to pave the way for Dimitri, she sent Rosa out of their den with her blessing. Rosa pulled out her cell the minute she reached the street.

"Maura? Has Josie returned?"

"No. Did you find him?"

Rosa quickly explained being sidetracked by her mother. "But I'm out the door now. I promised to check in on Dante again, but then I'll sniff around and see if I can find him for you."

"I appreciate it. At least now Heidi is here to hang out with. We're doing a search on the internet for baby names." Her laughter was proof enough that at least she didn't pace the floors howling for her mate.

Rosa wondered how she would handle sitting alone at night while her male ran with the other werewolves in the pack. In this case, Dimitri and Josie and sometimes Nicolo spent most of their nights prowling the mountain and venturing into Valle. Rosa knew this from making it her business since she moved here to know as much about Dimitri as possible.

Dimitri visited dens, spent time in the diner and bars in Valle and kept up on current events firsthand by sniffing out any trouble and acting on it the moment it happened. Hardly anyone in the pack complained of his actions. He dug his claws into his pack and took care of all matters immediately.

But what kind of mate would that make him? If she insisted he hung out with her then he would no longer be out and about, sniffing out trouble or keeping up on news. The pack might start to complain. And claws would be pointed at her.

Heidi and Maura had each other when their mates were gone. Rosa wasn't sure she would fit into that picture. "Which leaves only one option," she decided, clenching her teeth together with determination. "I would have to run with him."

And what better way to prove she could run by his side and help the pack than to settle this matter of finding funds to help build a town for all of them?

Now all she had to do was convince Dante to help Dimitri.

Nightfall brought back the chill of winter. With spring just around the corner, the days were warming up. The darkness made her itch to let the change take over, enjoy the warmth of her coat and run with the icy chill air slapping at her face.

It would take just as long to warm up her car as it would to walk half the distance to Moira and Dante's den. Maybe the hike across the side of the mountain would do her some good. And possibly give her time to figure out a good speech to sell them both on the idea of helping their pack.

That would be her angle. She decided that as she traipsed across their yard almost an hour later. The vigorous hike made her heart pound, and she yanked her hair out from underneath her coat, feeling the moist sweat against her flesh. Her cheeks burned from the cold, but blood pumped in her veins, giving her new life to take on her task.

The door opened before she reached it. "You actually came back." Moira stood in a long white gown, her bare feet wiggling against the cold as she stepped to the side and allowed Rosa entrance.

"Yes. There's something I want to talk to you about."

Moira instantly searched her brain, trying to learn for herself what Rosa was about before she explained herself. Rosa looked down at her numb fingers and struggled with the buttons on her coat, focusing solely on the action. Remembering how Dimitri kept her out of his head by reciting the code of chivalry, she suddenly understood how annoying it could be to have someone enter your thoughts before you were ready to share.

"What did you want to talk about?" Dante appeared in the doorway, wearing sweatpants and no shirt. His arm was wrapped with white gauze and a sling around his neck kept it held at a ninety degree angle. Otherwise, he didn't wear a shirt. In spite of his obviously mending injury, he still looked very deadly with muscles bulging everywhere even as he relaxed in the doorway.

Rosa swallowed the lump in her throat and returned her attention to Moira. Best to get the conversation out in the open before the two of them pulled bits and pieces of it out of her mind.

"Didn't you used to work for Werewolf Affairs?" She jumped in with all paws.

"Not exactly. I worked for GWAR."

"GWAR?" Rosa hadn't heard of it.

"Global Werewolf Attack and Reconnaissance." Moira cocked her head, her dark eyes shifting over Rosa's face as she studied her. "Why do you ask?"

She's not the one who can help you. Dante's thoughts were as loud as if he spoke them.

Rosa glanced at him, sighing and frowning. "Our pack needs funding. The Werewolf Affairs office isn't going to help. Or if they are, they are going to procrastinate so long that we'll all suffer from lack of decent roads, shops for us to buy our supplies from or even a school for our cubs. Do you have any connections who might be able to help?" She asked the last question quickly, almost stumbling over her words.

Why the hell should I help Dimitri? His thoughts seemed to bellow off the walls.

Rosa flinched. "You would be helping the pack." She reminded herself that this was Dante. No matter how much of a bully he wished to be at the moment, he was still the pale cousin who helped her with the gift, who ran and hunted with her when they were still cubs.

"Dimitri didn't send her here." Moira offered the information then turned and looked at the kitchen. Apparently she didn't want to leave Rosa alone to upset her mate.

Several coffee cups floated through the air in the next minute, the hot brew inside them almost dripping over the edges as they drifted across the room.

One went to Dante, and Rosa reached for the cup that came at her. A drop of coffee splattered on the side of her hand, burning her skin. She held the cup with her other hand and brought her suddenly sensitive skin to her mouth.

"So if I call in a favor or two, make arrangements for money to suddenly be available, that will make me look good. Dimitri will appear inept to the pack." He walked over to the couch and sat slowly, holding his full cup in front of him and then sipping after he reclined.

"Not if you make sure it doesn't happen like that." Rosa grabbed a chair that was part of their dining room set and lifted it, carrying it so that it faced Dante. She sat and stared at him, hearing his angry thoughts toward Dimitri. "Dante, he is trying. I wanted to go to the WA office with him earlier today, but he wouldn't let me. Then when you showed up that sealed my fate. He is seriously trying to get the funding for our pack."

"And he's going to be pissed as hell when he learns you are trying to find money that you believe he can't gather on his own."

God. She hoped Dante was wrong about that one. "I doubt anyone would be able to get that office to help Malta werewolves."

"They were friendly to me when I was there," Moira offered.

Rosa captured a glimpse of a memory in Moira's mind of a time not so long ago when she was still an agent working for the government. What an exciting life full of incredible adventures she must have led. Rosa had to keep it on the subject though. Someday she would ask Moira to share some of her stories.

"So you know the werewolves who work there?" Rosa asked.

"I met one bitch who helped me before Dante and I mated. But I'm not sure she still works there."

Damn him. I can't believe he has the balls to show up here. Dante growled and his thoughts confused Rosa until she heard footsteps outside the front door.

Instead of answering the door, Moira moved to sit next to Dante on the couch. The front door opened of its own accord. Rosa wasn't sure if Moira or Dante opened it with their mind. Their gifts were stronger than hers. She stood instinctively though, her defenses kicking in until she saw who stood in the open doorway.

Dimitri's dark gaze burrowed through her. "I thought I smelled you here," he said in a harsh whisper.

"I just got here."

You don't have to explain your actions to him. Dante didn't speak out loud and continued sitting, resting his uninjured arm casually around Moira. He focused on Dimitri though, and Rosa hated the aggression she smelled coming from him.

"Why are you here?" Dimitri stepped inside and then moved in further, glancing behind him when the door closed silently.

Don't tell him. Let him say why it is that he's here.

Rosa didn't give Dante her attention and refused to acknowledge his order. Her gaze remained locked with Dimitri as he moved closer until he stood right in front of her.

"I wanted to help the pack find means to get the money," she began and her mouth went dry.

Moira and Dante both thought their instructions loudly.

That's it. Get him good and pissed, Dante thought, the sneer in his mind chilling her blood.

Moira, on the other hand, argued with both of their minds. *Back any werewolf in the corner and you would make him angry. Leave her alone, Dante.*

"You wanted to help the pack," Dimitri repeated, his eyes narrowing and the shape of his mouth changing slightly. His scent wrapped around her, growing richer, muskier and at the same time filling with his anger. "How are you helping by being here?"

If only Dimitri could see how hard she fought to stay out of his mind and at the same time ignore the thoughts plaguing her from Dante and Moira.

"I thought they might know werewolves," she told him, hating how her voice cracked. Showing weakness, allowing her fear that she truly would piss him off to surface wouldn't help matters any. Dimitri would see her strength and her lack of fear. "Both of them have connections. Moira has been in the Werewolf Affairs office before. I asked if they could help."

"I see." Dimitri lifted his hand and combed it through the side of her hair until it snagged in the thickness. "Have you been in my mind, little bitch?" he whispered, his voice thick with emotion.

"No," she whispered, shaking her head, which made him hold on tighter.

Dante growled and Dimitri stiffened, shifting his gaze over her shoulder. What Dante implied in his mind irritated her, like he possessed the right to say whether Dimitri approved of having his mind probed or not. The urge to let her claws grow, snap at him and demand he show respect rose in her like raw energy. But she wouldn't tear her attention from Dimitri. In spite of her efforts to leave his thoughts alone, she knew he was glad to see her.

"So it's purely coincidence that you came here to see if these two could help the pack." His black, straight hair curved around the hard features of his face. A small muscle twitched along his jawbone while he pressed his lips together and stared at her.

"Purely coincidence?" In spite of her efforts, his thoughts were so strong.

He yelled at her with his mind. *You knew I was coming here to ask Dante for help. Admit it. Did you think I wasn't capable of approaching him? Is that what this is all about?*

She shook her head—slowly, since he held her hair. But then she straightened, biting her lower lip and refusing to let go of his gaze.

"I can't ignore your thoughts when you're screaming them at me," she let him know. She would be damned if he got pissed off for her hearing what was on his mind when he yelled louder with his head than he did with his mouth. "And no, I had no idea you were coming over here. My mother suggested that Dante and Moira might have contacts that could help the pack."

She placed her hand on his chest and his heart pounded steadily against her palm. Dante rose to his feet when she touched him and Moira jumped up, pushing herself between her mate and Dimitri.

Dimitri pulled her against him, shifting his body so that she wasn't between him and the other two. Rosa twisted, needing to see everyone, but she was overjoyed by the scent of domination that emanated from Dimitri's body.

"What did you tell Rosa when she asked for your help?" Dimitri focused on Dante.

"I told her offering my assistance would show you weren't capable of running this pack." Dante had an intolerable knack of keeping his scent to himself when he chose to do so. There was no way of telling by looking or sniffing what emotions ran through his body.

Dimitri stiffened at his words, his arms turning hard as steel as he held on to Rosa.

"That's not true." She could barely move in Dimitri's arms, but she looked up at him the best that she could. He continued glaring at Dante and she knew the only thing that kept him from leaping was the knowledge that Dante was already injured. "A good pack leader seeks out whatever avenues exist to protect his pack in spite of his own personal feelings."

"She's right." Dimitri's expression didn't change. "You will contact any resources that you might have and help in finding money to get this pack off the ground."

Dante growled and Moira pressed her hands on his shoulders. He ignored her, not moving to touch her or push her away. "You dare to enter my den and tell me what I will do," he sneered.

"You're a member of this pack. You will help and offer your talents in any way that I see fit."

"I'll only tell you once, Spalto—don't ever tell me what to do."

Rosa fought Dimitri, desperately needing him to let her go. When he released her, he took a step back, combing his hair with his fingers and glaring at her. Although his anger wasn't directed at her, she saw the frustration and irritation that he swallowed while trying to figure out how to deal with the bullheaded Dante.

"Just ask him," she whispered, knowing Moira and Dante could hear her.

But they battled with their own emotions, and each other. She prayed that would give her one moment of time with Dimitri when their thoughts wouldn't all be intertwined. She dared brush her fingers against his hard-set jaw.

His attention snapped to her. "What? And allow him to knock me down again?" he hissed.

"You didn't ask him before – you demanded his help. Just ask him," she pleaded.

And if Dante told him no twice, she would kick his stubborn ass.

Dimitri glared at her with eyes darker than onyx. His muscles pressed against his jacket and blue jeans. Hard packed steel swelled over every inch of him and made her insides swarm with feverish desire. But she ached just as badly to see him accomplish what he came here to do. Knowing how proud Dimitri was, she knew it took one hell of a lot of mental stamina for him to walk up to this den and enter with a request.

After a long, tense silence, Dimitri looked over her head. She didn't turn around, didn't need to see Dante and Moira behind her. All of her attention was on Dimitri, willing him to have the strength to humble himself in front of Dante.

"I would appreciate your help in finding other means to finance paving our roads and getting some businesses started."

She jumped when Dante growled behind her. Dimitri pulled her to him, again her protector, when Dante turned, howled and hit the wall with his free hand.

Chapter Ten

Dimitri was more than aware of Rosa's soft body pressed against his as he stared over her head at Dante. The werewolf's eyes went completely silver and he pounded the wall with his good fist.

"You're a pompous ass," Dante hissed. "And your humility has a foul stench to it."

"I'm not here to make friends." Dimitri felt an incredible calm rush over him as his mind cleared.

Moira hugged herself and glared at the floor, more than likely so she wouldn't clobber her fool mate. Dante met his gaze, fire raging inside him as either the gift, or the change, or possibly both fought to take over.

"You have enough werewolves in the pack to pave the roads."

"True." Dimitri had gone over this at the last pack meeting, and Dante was there. Possibly the werewolf needed it recapped for him. Dimitri didn't need to justify what actions brought him here, but if Dante couldn't get a grip on things, he had no problem helping to set his mind straight. "Muscle isn't the issue here. It takes money to get the supplies to provide decent roads. We need sewers and pipes laid to help with runoff. There isn't enough equipment to clear the roads in the winter. And it will take more money to repave them come summer. We have dens who want to set up shop, open their stores, not to mention we need to build a school for our cubs. Again it all takes cold, hard cash, which doesn't grow on trees."

"Don't insult me." Dante fisted his hands, and even the muscles in his wrapped arm that hung in its sling bulged.

"Just giving you the education you're sniffing for."

Dante growled.

"Stop it." Rosa twisted in his arms, brushing her hands over his chest and looking up at him and then at her cousin. "You two are talking—keep doing it."

"She's right," Moira added quickly. "This isn't about building a bond between you two. God knows you're both too stubborn for that." She glared at her mate and then Dimitri. "This is about the pack. No one is arguing that you both care about our future."

"I'll give it some thought," Dante said.

"You have the connections?" Dimitri wouldn't waste his breath here a moment longer if the werewolf didn't have resources.

"I might."

Dimitri nodded. He would give Dante time to see what he could sniff out. Putting his hands on Rosa's shoulders, he guided her toward the door.

"She isn't going with you." Dante reached for Rosa.

"I'm not here to discuss Rosa." Dimitri swept her off her feet, yanking her away from Dante and pushing her to the other side of him. He glared at the werewolf.

"Don't push your luck, werewolf," Dante hissed. "I just agreed to help you. Would you throw that all away over a bitch?"

Dimitri ached to punch the brute square in his nose for being such a pompous ass. "You didn't just agree to help me. You agreed to help your pack. You made it quite clear you think little of me, which I've never doubted for a moment, not while we've been on this mountain, not for years. See if you can help this pack better than you did our last one."

No matter how hard those who rallied around Dante tried howling that he had nothing to do with their pack burning on Malta, Dimitri still had his reservations. And to hell with the werewolf if he read Dimitri's mind right now and heard his doubts. He pushed Rosa to the door, then reached around her and yanked it open.

The cold night air wrapped around them, but it didn't cool off the fire burning inside him.

Dante turned his attention to Rosa. "I expect you to call me within minutes to tell me that you're at your den."

She didn't speak, but Dimitri knew she said something to him in her thoughts. Dante stiffened and for a moment it looked like smoke would blow from his ears. Moira grabbed his good arm, shifting her attention from Rosa to Dante. She never looked at him.

That was fine. Dante's bitch could tend to him. He came here to do what he needed to do for his pack, and now he was out of here. Keeping his grip on Rosa, he left the den. The door slammed behind him and he knew neither Moira nor Dante had touched it.

"How did you get here?" Dimitri didn't take his hands off Rosa when they reached his truck.

She studied his arms, his chest, then lifted her gaze to his face as her fingers traced lines up his torso to his collarbone. "I walked," she told him, then leaned into him, stretching her body against his, and tried to kiss him.

He grabbed her upper arms, putting a bit of distance between them. Rosa was on fire, her adrenaline pumping inside her. It made her scent even more provocative. Their bodies touched way too much while inside Dante's den, but Dimitri would be damned before he got a boner while confronting that asshole. Now that every bit of his concentration wasn't focused on dealing with his nemesis, sparks popped and sizzled inside him. He could ride Rosa hard and long tonight and it wouldn't drain all of his energy. She didn't deserve it so rough from him just because he was so wound up.

"I'll take you to your den." Having her sit next to him in his truck might be more than he could handle right now. The gleam in her eyes when she looked up at him was

enough for him to know she followed his thoughts. He doubted he had the strength to keep them from her at the moment. "What did you say to Dante inside before we left?"

"I told him the only way I was going to my den was if you refused me."

"Damn it." He yanked open his passenger door and watched her slide into his truck.

Rosa smelled of her usual lavender scent. He inhaled what was left of the anger and high energy that had been on her when he arrived at this den. His scent clung to her skin, overriding all other aromas. If he took her to her den and Rosa called Dante, then the werewolf would know Dimitri had refused her. And after marking her like he had, refusing Rosa would humiliate her in the eyes of her den.

The little bitch was pretty damned clever.

"So where are we going?" She snuggled up to him, pulling her legs onto the seat and leaning into him.

He scowled at her glowing smile. "I have half a mind to take you to your den just to show you that I won't be bullied."

Her smile faded and she looked so hurt that instantly everything inside him went soft—well, almost everything. Sitting this close to Rosa kept his dick hard and alert.

"I thought that to him out of anger," she said quietly, her scent softening. She shifted, her breasts brushing against his arm. "But don't worry. There wouldn't be any pleasure in manipulating your actions. I would never know if you were with me because it's what you wanted if I did that."

He pulled out of the driveway and turned toward his den. "You're with me because I want you to be," he told her.

She didn't say anything, but the smell of her happiness almost drowned out her rich, lustful scent that nearly intoxicated him. His phone rang between them, and again Rosa shifted.

"Want me to get it for you?" She looked searchingly at his face.

Dimitri saw her effort not to chase him too hard. Although there was little humor to it, he almost laughed. Rosa ran after him so hard, going so far as to sabotage another bitch's den just to put her mark on him. He stretched slightly, lifting his elbows as he drove and allowed her to free the cell phone from his belt.

He took it from her and glanced at the screen. "What?" he asked after accepting Josie's call.

"Did you go to Dante's?" Josie asked.

"Just left from there."

"How did it go?"

"I had intervention."

"Intervention?"

"Rosa was there."

"I see. Is she with you now?"

"Yup." And he was sure she heard every word Josie said through the cell phone. Dimitri didn't look at her face to find out. Her scent subsided, giving enough hint that she concentrated on something – either his call or his thoughts or both. "Where are you now?"

"A few of us are up at my den. We're thinking about heading out for a run – figured you might want to go."

"Sounds good. I'll head that way in a few." As soon as he hung up his cell, he glanced at Rosa.

She watched him, her soft features accentuated by moonlight streaming in through the windshield. "You don't want to take me."

"I wasn't thinking that."

"I'm guessing."

He sighed, pulling into his den and then putting the truck in park. Turning to face her, he couldn't stop himself from stroking a strand of her hair with his fingers.

"I will never be accused of not honoring our traditions." He wasn't sure how to approach the discussion of mating, especially since it wasn't something he'd considered doing any time in the near future. Or at least he hadn't until recently.

"Nor would I," she murmured, straightening and folding her hands in her lap.

She suddenly smelled disappointed. Damn it. He didn't want to hurt her. "Rosa." God. What the fuck was the right thing to say? "If we make public appearances together, my pack will anticipate an announcement. The pack leader has the obligation to provide the example others will follow. We've already marked each other with our scents."

Why in the hell could he find the words to actually *ask* Dante for help, but then get all tongue-tied when it came to talking to Rosa about mating?

She adjusted herself, moving to her side of the cab and then looking out the passenger window. Dimitri actually reached for her, intent on pulling her back to him, when he stopped himself. If they called things off right now, or at least slowed everything down drastically, possibly the pack wouldn't start howling their demands that he mate with Rosa. And Dimitri would not let it get to that point. A pack leader who didn't lead the most honorable life shouldn't be leading a pack. None of his actions would be sniffed after and deemed inappropriate. He put his hand on his thigh and forced himself not to touch her.

"Earlier Maura called me. I was supposed to call her back if I sniffed out her mate." She licked her lips and stared at her lap, then turned and focused on him with her sultry tan-colored eyes. "I knew I would never be able to sit in a den, continually wondering where my mate was while he ran over the mountain, determined to find trouble before it started."

"Josie is a good werewolf."

She nodded quickly. "And so are you. Very good," she added quietly and then sucked in her breath while her cheeks flushed noticeably even in the darkness.

"This is about more than sex. Even if it were just sex, we couldn't be seen with each other, or carry each other's scent without the pack talking. Possibly if you howled for someone who wasn't pack leader..."

"I don't want another werewolf, Dimitri. I want you. And you aren't getting my point." She puckered her lips, making them look damned ready to be kissed. "I told you I couldn't sit in a den while my mate ran around protecting the pack. I would have to be out there by your side. And so that's what I did."

"That's what you did?" He understood after a moment but wasn't sure he liked it. "You went to speak to Dante as a queen bitch would do for her pack leader."

"I wouldn't say it like that."

"I wouldn't either, since you aren't queen bitch. What exactly is it that you did then?"

"I tried to help you," she hissed, suddenly angry.

"Did I ask for your help?" God. Did she really think he would have failed with Dante if she hadn't sniffed him out first?

"You didn't have to ask." Her breathing got heavier and she searched his face then looked around the cab like she fought for what else to say.

"I wouldn't have to ask if you were queen bitch."

"Which I'm not." She slid backward, reaching for her door, then pushed it open, letting the cold flood the small space between them. "You've made that real fucking clear, Dimitri. I don't need to hear it again."

"Rosa." He almost had her arm but she got away from him. "Damn it. Come back here."

Dimitri shut off the engine and hopped out of his side of the truck. Rosa raced up the mountain, disappearing into the darkness in the next minute.

Son of a bitch!

Run after her. Do you really want her to slip through your claws?

Like the asshole that he was, he stood and watched Rosa until he couldn't hear her boots pounding against the hard ground any longer.

"Damn it," he said again and jumped back into his truck. Maybe they did need some time apart. Things were moving damned fast between the two of them, at least according to tradition and their laws. He'd swelled inside of her and couldn't wait to do it again. His scent on her appealed to him more than anything else he had ever smelled. But if they appeared together at a pack run, with his mark on her, the pack would anticipate his announcement.

Was he ready to do that?

It's the fucking right thing to do. His thoughts pissed him off even further. Nothing annoyed him more than feeling trapped. *But you want her, you son of a bitch. Why the hell can't you tell her that?*

The physical part of their relationship raced at a much faster speed than the emotional part. Or maybe he wasn't ready to accept how he felt about her.

Fuck that. He accepted how he felt about her. He was just too big of a chickenshit to admit those feelings to her. And now she ran from him. Glowering, he stared out the windshield and allowed his thoughts to war with each other. Finally, growling at the darkness, he shoved his truck into gear. Josie and the others would wonder where in the hell he was if he didn't show up soon.

Dimitri still scowled when he parked in front of Josie's house. Josie and Maura stood out front with a handful of their pack lingering around and chatting. He stared at Rosa's backside as she faced Maura. Josie stood next to Nicolo and the two males moved away from the others standing around them and walked up to Dimitri's truck.

"I hear your visit to Werewolf Affairs didn't go over real well," Nicolo said in greeting.

"Good news travels real damned fast." Dimitri glanced past them at Rosa, but she didn't turn around and acknowledge him. He watched her toss her thick black hair over her shoulder and laugh at something Maura said. The little bitch planned on ignoring him. Just fucking lovely.

Josie gave him an odd look and then followed his gaze over to the bitches. Dimitri scowled at him. "Shut the fuck up," he hissed.

Josie held his hands out in a sign of surrender but gave him an impish grin that Dimitri ached to wipe off his face with his claws. "She didn't mention you at all when she showed up. I do know she called Maura and we invited her to join us. So she is running with an escort. Don't go getting your tail in a knot."

"Mind filling me in on the conversation here?" Nicolo complained.

"Lovers' quarrel," Josie muttered.

Nicolo rocked up on his toes when Dimitri growled. "She would be a damned good mate for you."

"Why the hell do you say that?" Dimitri didn't like the knowing smile his older littermate gave him any more than the smirk on Josie's face.

"You would do well to take a queen bitch who has the gift," Nicolo pointed out.

"She's a sexy bitch," Josie added.

"Those aren't reasons to mate with her." He had the energy built up to kick both of their asses.

"Oh hell—you went and fell in love with her, didn't you?" Josie punched his arm.

Dimitri was ready to pounce. "Are we going to go on this fucking run or not?"

"Round your pack up and let's head out." Josie shook his head and then left him to join his mate. He laughed like he had just heard a damned good joke when he walked away from them.

"Once you tell her how you feel about her, it will be a lot easier." Nicolo didn't wait for Dimitri to respond, but went to join his mate.

Dimitri stared into the darkness, wondering if he wouldn't do better to just run alone tonight. But his pack was here and they would stand around and gossip all damned night until he announced it was time to leave.

Sucking in his breath, he stifled his emotions before walking over to Josie and Maura. Gallantly nodding at Rosa, he put his hand on Maura's shoulder, silently interrupting their conversation.

"Take the bitches inside to change," he told Maura, since they were at her den. With unmated bitches in the group, it was proper for them to change where the males couldn't see them.

One of the newer dens in the pack showed up, and the mother and her two teenage daughters joined Maura. "Dimitri, we haven't formally been introduced," the mother said, nodding to him and grabbing both of her daughters and practically pushing them in front of him. "I'm Margot Shelling. My mate is over there, Pete Shelling. And these are our daughters, both of them mating age—Priscilla and Polly."

The two young bitches gave him the once-over and he felt like raw steak being eyed before it was devoured.

"We'll make sure your daughters are properly escorted." Rosa stepped forward, breaking the teenage bitches' concentration on him with the reminder that they were being watched.

He didn't notice Tonya on the other side of Maura until she stepped forward. "Who is going to escort me?" she asked, winking at Dimitri.

Rosa growled and Tonya stepped back quickly. Maura grinned at Rosa, shaking her head and then guiding the bitches into her den. Rosa hesitated and turned, catching him watching her.

"Just so you know," she said quietly. "I didn't mention you when I arrived. No one knows we had a fight."

"We didn't have a fight."

She blew out a loud breath of frustration. "You are the most stubborn werewolf," she began and then turned away from him, tossing her hair over her shoulder and following Maura into the den.

"Dimitri," Josie called. "Come here and meet Pete Shelling."

Grateful to get the sassy little bitch off his mind, even if it would probably be for just a second, he strolled over to the group of males and exchanged introductions with a Malta werewolf he barely remembered from the old pack.

"And this is my littermate, Paul." Pete Shelling was a stocky werewolf with short black hair shaved close to his head. His littermate had a similar build.

"Oh good. You didn't leave without us." Perry Zammit hurried from the parked cars that filled Josie's drive. His mate grinned at all of them as she held her mate's hand.

"The bitches are already inside." Dimitri nodded at Claudette Zammit, who leaned into her mate and pecked his cheek with a quick kiss, then left the males. Dimitri offered quick introductions. "Are all of you in one den right now?" he asked the Shelling males.

"No. My littermate has enough of a den without me crowding the action. We planned on approaching you tomorrow to see if you have any cabins available on the mountain, and to officially ask to join your pack."

"All Malta werewolves are welcome here. Stop by tomorrow and we'll discuss what trades you know and see about getting you settled."

"Do you have a lot of single bitches in the pack?" Paul glanced toward the cabin. "I smell a fair amount of them in there. And you sent them inside because a few would need escorts?"

"Of course. We have a few single females, and our run is mixed tonight with those well acquainted and those who aren't. You'll find that I run a very honorable pack here on the mountain." He studied Paul's profile as the male focused on Josie's den. "All single females here tonight already have escorts. Tomorrow when you stop by I'll visit with you and then let each of them know about you. If they're interested, I'm sure you'll find out."

When he grinned at Dimitri, it was obvious what an ugly son of a bitch he was. Dimitri glanced around the yard, more than aware that Josie and Nicolo paid a bit too much attention to him at the moment. To hell with them both. He wouldn't be pushed into mating anyone. And it would just have to suck if he decided that Rosa wasn't available to any other single male right now.

Josie came up behind him and spoke quietly into his ear. "That single bitch who isn't really single just sent me a mental message to let you know that the females are ready for the run."

Dimitri turned his head enough to see the shit-eating grin on Josie's face. "Fuck you," he mouthed, then turned toward the other males. "Let the run begin," he shouted.

Whoops and hollers filled the air as the males stripped out of their clothes and twisted them around their necks. Dimitri moved to the side of the cabin, aware that the females would exit through the back door so they could come outside naked and then let the change take over.

The cold night air was brutal against his bare skin. Focusing on tying his jeans and shirt into small knots, he let his heartbeat pick up speed. Blood pumped in his veins, flowing quickly throughout his body as his muscles grew and changed shape. His senses heightened and a quick, hard pain racked his system. He managed to tie his clothes around his neck before his fingers got too thick to handle the simple task.

When a hard breeze raced around the surrounding evergreens, it didn't feel as cold as it would have if the change weren't hitting him full force. Already his skin was thick enough to handle the elements. His pack moved around him, crunching dead leaves and twigs as their feet—or paws—pounded on the ground. Moonlight streaming through the branches made patches of the yard almost too bright. And the shaded areas became more distinct as his eyes altered, allowing him to view everything with a crisper, more focused vision.

He smelled the bitches before he saw them. Falling to all fours, he watched the mated males leap to join their females and the single males move around the group, sniffing out any opportunity that might exist to get their dicks wet before the sun came up.

A good, hard run was best if followed by sweaty, intense sex. Like he stood a chance in hell for his night to end that way now.

Dimitri leapt to the front of his pack with Josie and his mate falling in alongside him. On the other side of Josie, Rosa fell into place, running alongside her escort.

Which made it easy to keep his eye on her, as well as be tortured by her sweet scent that seemed to rise above every other smell around him.

He didn't announce that they start running. He didn't need to. In their fur, with primal instinct prevailing, leaping into the night was the natural thing to do. Running hard and fast didn't allow him to escape his thoughts though.

Rosa wanted him. Rosa was a damned good bitch. He'd fucking swelled in her, leaving his scent for anyone to smell. He'd marked her as his female. Tradition clearly stated he mated with her when he filled her and bonded with her. He was pack leader, bound to uphold law and tradition in his pack. He was the fucking example for all of them. Yet he hesitated in doing the honorable thing.

But...was that what he was doing?

Large trees passed him. He leapt over boulders stuck in the ground like it was cub's play. Cold air parted his long, thick black coat, feeling damned good on his hide. He should take the time to enjoy the pleasure in the run. And he would if only his thoughts would quit plaguing him.

It would be honorable to ensure that Rosa got the best male out there. That's what Rosa deserved. The absolute fucking best. And maybe that wasn't him. Maybe the unfair acts done to him and his den left him ruined and unsuitable to mate with any bitch.

When they reached the swell in the creek, which looked more like a fucking river from all the melting snow, Dimitri knew they were almost to the top of the mountain. He was game to go over the top and race all the way to the bottom of the other side. But with younger females in the run, he slowed the group, allowing them time to prance and fish in the icy mountain spring.

Stepping in and lapping at the freezing water, Dimitri then straightened and surveyed his pack members. Perry Zammit barked quickly, grabbing Dimitri's

attention. He met the werewolf's gaze, then watched as Perry nudged his mate until she took off running down the side of the water. Perry was letting him know that he and his mate were breaking off from the run, taking some time to themselves. Apparently running this far was all the young couple needed before more carnal needs took over between them. Not to mention Perry's mate's swollen belly was even more obvious in her fur. This might be all the run she could handle in her late stage of pregnancy.

Watching Claudette Zammit waddle away from him with Perry matching her pace opened a dam that protected unwanted memories from surfacing. Suddenly he saw his sire, looking like he would burst with pride when Dimitri's mother, her belly swollen with pregnancy, walked by his side.

The larger your den, the more love surrounds you, his sire used to tell him.

Dimitri shook his head until he rattled the memory loose from his thoughts. He wouldn't create a stench in the air from his thoughts by thinking about Malta. That life was dead. And he wouldn't think about it again.

Glancing around at the rest of the group, he watched the Shelling den prance in the water, more than likely feeling exhilarated that they finally had a pack, a place to settle in and call their own. It was a damned good feeling, and one he thrilled on giving to as many dens as he could. Malta werewolves were through being tortured. Every one of them who approached him would know a good life here in the mountains.

He would damned well see to it, no matter what it took.

He lapped at more of the water, keeping his head low and watching ahead of him as Josie and his white little *lunewolf* bitch chased each other up the stream. Something else that bit at him and yet he allowed to happen—mixing their breed. There was something about how the little bitch's coat glowed under the moonlight. Nicolo, his older littermate, also ran with a *lunewolf* bitch. In fact, they would all find out real damned soon how well the two breeds mixed when his mate birthed their first cub.

Tonya's strong female scent hit him at the same time that he met her gaze. She laughed at him, her long tongue hanging from the side of her mouth and her silver eyes glowing against her black coat. Her attention shifted slightly, as if something behind him distracted her. Dimitri took his time looking over his shoulder, not smelling aggression. Behind him, Rosa sat at the edge of the bank, watching him—watching both of them.

Her refusal to charge Tonya would be all the encouragement the little slut needed. And it was a low blow that Dimitri knew he deserved. Rosa wasn't going to fight for him.

Damn it. For some reason, that pissed him off. Like he had any right to be mad. Growling at Tonya, he took off running into the water, leaping when it got deeper. He didn't want Tonya. He wanted...

Shit. His thoughts were twisting around in directions he couldn't control. She was playing games with him. Rosa sniffed after him, chased him down, and the last time

they were up here, almost destroyed Tonya's den the next day. And now she sat there, cleaning her fur like she didn't have a care in the world.

Paybacks fucking suck. Maybe he did say some harsh words back in his truck. Throwing in her face that she acted like the queen bitch wasn't supposed to insult her. She just took it that way.

The Shelling den came out of the water, shaking water everywhere when they stood along the bank. The littermate—the single male—sauntered over to Rosa. Her head snapped up at him and she no longer lazily cleaned herself.

Where the fuck was Josie?

Dimitri searched the water quickly, then spotted the werewolf up the bank, rolling his little *lunewulf* bitch around. The motherfucker! He was supposed to be Rosa's escort, which meant keeping all single males the hell away from her. For a moment he swore Josie lifted his head, taking in the situation and grinning at Dimitri as if to say—*sucks that you've got to do your own dirty work, doesn't it?*

Dimitri growled, turning his attention toward the single male who now walked lazily around Rosa, as if eyeing the wonderful treat he just discovered and wondering where to bite in first.

The bastard could just go find another fucking treat.

Dimitri leapt over the water, reaching the bank within a couple strides. Without hesitating, he pushed into Rosa, almost knocking her over, and came face-to-face with the other werewolf.

Mine! He growled.

Chapter Eleven

Rosa leapt out of the way, almost falling into the cold water. She dug her claws into the earth to keep her balance and growled at Dimitri, getting a mouth full of his fur for her efforts. His scent filled her lungs, intoxicating her with how possessive and determined he smelled.

His warring thoughts distracted her so much that she didn't see him coming before he leapt. The new single male, who she didn't know, rolled to his side and quickly jumped to his feet, teeth bared until he realized who he was about to tangle with. Even then, his hackles were up as he sullenly retreated toward his stunned den.

Now what, wolf man? She glared at Dimitri, daring him to continue to make a stand for her when his mind had been focused on all the reasons why he should leave her alone. She'd managed to stay put when that slut traipsed around him, although if Dimitri hadn't run from her, Rosa wouldn't have held out much longer. Making mincemeat out of the little bitch sounded damned good. Right now, picking a fight with anyone, anything to relieve the frustration crawling through her would be too easy to do.

His long, black coat was damp from the water and looked radiant under the moonlight. Even with its thickness, his powerful muscle tone rippled underneath, making her mouth water. The urge to turn in to him, raise her tail and submit overwhelmed her. As strong as her animal instincts were at the moment, her human side still raced in her blood. And her aggravation peaked.

Damn you for throwing in my face earlier that I am not your mate and then practically fighting for me now. No matter that her heart raced a mile a minute with the knowledge that he couldn't stop his primal instinct to claim her while in his fur.

Dimitri raised his head, looking over her at their packmates, and a low growl rumbled from deep inside him. With a few quick barks he made his meaning known.

They were breaking away from the run. He stared into her eyes and she forgot to breathe, or be defiant and look away. Molten lava couldn't have been hotter than the look he gave her at that moment. Her legs almost gave out underneath her.

When he nudged her, indicating she should run at his side, she about fell over.

You're fucking with my head, damn you. You want me. You know you want me. Just admit it and make us both happy. She hated that he ignored her growls and instead pushed into her again until she fell in alongside him, picking up pace and leaving the others behind.

The werewolves staring after them as they disappeared behind rocks and trees would be howling the latest news to the rest of the pack as soon as they returned to their dens. Their pack leader ran alone with Rosa Anthony.

When will you announce our mating? She had a right to know the answer.

But when they stopped and she dared growl at him and stare into his deadly expression, all she got from his mind was one thing. He was going to fuck her.

Well, not here. Not like this. No way would he take her in his fur when he wouldn't acknowledge swelling inside her while they were in their flesh.

Turning quickly, she broke into a hard run, hauling ass down the mountain. Dimitri was bigger than she was, a werewolf in his prime, and there was no way she could outrun him.

The best she could manage was reaching Josie's den at the same time he did. And she panted so hard after the exhilarating chase down the mountain that all she could do when they reached his truck was move to the passenger side and try to regain her wits.

She stared at the muddy, rocky ground, catching her breath, and listened, learning where he was. He didn't come to her side of the truck.

"You have two choices." His voice was still garbled from going through the change. "Change now and get in the truck, or meet me at my den. But run from me again and I swear I will catch you."

Her heart pounded so hard she almost hyperventilated. Rosa looked up quickly, spotting him on the other side of the truck as he pulled his shirt over his head. His black hair was damp and stuck to his head and his dark eyes pierced right through her when he pulled his shirt down.

"You better decide now."

Dimitri didn't like being pushed into a quick decision. Well neither did she. Turning from him, she took off down the road, toward his den—and toward her own.

There was one problem. Leaving him made it really hard to know what was going on in his mind. What the hell just happened back there? Before their run, he made it damned clear she was out of line for trying to help since they weren't mated. Then he nearly attacked a werewolf for approaching her. And now he threw ultimatums at her.

You know you want him. And there was only one way to learn what was in his head.

She slowed when she reached his den, knowing it would be a few minutes before he got here in his truck. Circling the small cabin, she sniffed the ground, the walls and each window that she passed, learning that she was here alone and smelling Dimitri all over the place as she stalked his land.

What would he do when he got here? In his fur, he clearly looked like he would fuck her silly if she hadn't run. He would have. She didn't doubt it for a minute. Acknowledging that fact made her almost weak in the hind legs. Moisture clung to her coat. She smelled her need for him and paused, glancing into the darkness, assuring herself she was alone.

And she was—for the moment.

It wouldn't be long though. Dimitri would be here any second. Her scent was thick, stronger than usual, creamy and rich-smelling. Her body called out to his.

The craving to mate, in her fur, bond with him and mark him as her male, was strong enough that anyone nearby would smell it. Might be a good idea to get the hell out of her fur.

The cold bit at her flesh as the change washed over her insides. Her muscles constricted, painfully twisting around her bones. It took her a few minutes to stand up straight, her body damp and grossly unfulfilled. She shook miserably when she tried untying her clothes. Allowing the change when her mind was in all the wrong places made the metamorphosis an unpleasant experience. Her human brain didn't twist around her thoughts any better than her animal mind did.

And she hated it. Ever since she moved here, Dimitri filled her thoughts. She masturbated to images of him, followed his scent whenever she picked it up. And she flirted with him. It seemed forever now that she made advances, came on to him whenever he was around. It was damned easy to do when he didn't respond.

But then he did. He took her. Fucked her better than any fantasy she ever had about him. And now...now what?

It was like the two of them hung in limbo together, half changed—an incredibly frightening position to be stuck in.

"Let me help you." Dimitri's fingers shocked her flesh.

Rosa jumped and screamed. Was her own scent so strong and her mind so tangled in her thoughts that she didn't notice him approaching?

Obviously so.

"It's just me." His voice was soothing, almost too calm. Like he spoke to a frightened cub.

Rosa never would have imagined that Dimitri would speak with such a soft tone to anyone. She turned in his arms, standing naked and freezing before him as he untied her clothes from her neck. Then without permission, he swept her into his arms and marched to the front door of his den.

She didn't remember his front door already being opened, and he wasn't surprised to see it that way. She stiffened, thinking she was so lost in her thoughts that anyone could have approached her from behind and she wouldn't have known.

Dimitri kicked the door closed with his boot and then loosened his grip on her. She slid down his body, more than aware that she was completely naked and he fully dressed.

"This is bad." She didn't mean to speak out loud.

Dimitri cocked his head at her, frowning. "What is bad?"

"I didn't hear you come up to me outside."

"I smelled you the second I got out of my truck." He took a strand of her hair and twisted it between his fingers, then tugged slightly until she looked up at him. "Your scent called to me," he whispered.

She backed away from him, but he simply tightened his grip on her hair. Putting her hands on either side of her head, one covering his, she closed her eyes, shaking her head and trying to clear it.

"Dimitri, I've been howling for you for months."

"Looks like you got me."

"Do I?" She shook her head harder. This wasn't how she imagined getting him. "Your mind says one thing and your voice another. I call you on that and you tell me to stay out of your head. Well I guess I train easy. I was so out of your head and into my mind that you snuck right up on me."

"No one else would touch you," he told her, grabbing her hands from her head and pulling her back to him.

There wasn't any resistance in her. Every inch of her craved his body. "Especially after tonight," she said, thrilled that he would fight for her but torn up in turmoil at the same time.

Her words hit him harder than she planned. "Yeah," he said, letting go of her and then walking over to the fireplace.

She stood in the dark, naked and suddenly very cold. He had her clothes, and he dropped them on the floor next to him. That appeared invitation enough for her to move to his side.

"Why did you do it, Dimitri?" She crept into his mind, knowing he didn't want her there but needing to understand him.

His thoughts were as jumbled as hers.

Because I don't want anyone else touching her.

"Rosa, I'm not sure I'm the mating kind." His body was stiff as a board, every one of his muscles knotted up hard. "There's not much love inside me. And mating is until death. I'm a selfish fucking werewolf to swell inside you, attack for you and then admit I may not have what it takes to keep you."

She stared at her pile of clothes on the floor, digesting his words and feeling her anger slowly simmer to a boil inside her. When she looked at him, even though his back was to her and he was crouched in front of the fireplace looking ready to pounce, she swore she saw a wall of resistance built around him. It went as far as blocking out his scent. Even his mind seemed to go blank on her, as if he fought with every grain of his existence to shut himself down just to prove his point.

Rosa moved quickly, grabbing the hair on the back of his head and yanking so that his head bobbed for a moment. She surprised him and her action created the results she wanted, even if they were short-lived. Dimitri jumped to his feet, reaching for her wrist and grabbing it before she could move out of the way. Taking her hand from his head, he held it tight enough between them that she felt the pinch in her flesh.

Ignoring the fire that suddenly burned in his eyes, she growled at him.

"Being pack leader is until death, and I hear you killed to gain the rank." She clenched her teeth together, hurting her jaw to keep her teeth from growing. Letting her emotions get out of control here would make it harder to drive her point home. And he would hear her words. "And don't tell me you don't know how to love. If you didn't, you wouldn't still feel the pain inside you from those you've lost."

She jumped when he roared and couldn't back up quickly enough before he grabbed her and threw her on the couch.

"Don't ever talk about my past. You have no clue about my past. Not even from my mind. Because I don't even allow my past in there." He pointed at her, then turned his back to her once again, blowing out a hard sigh and then scrubbing his hair with his hands.

She sprang off the couch, hurrying around him and then stopping at the strong emotions that created lines in his face. Never had she seen him so racked with pain. Just as quickly as she saw what she did, it disappeared.

"I didn't mean to throw you. Are you hurt?" Once again he spoke with a tone quiet enough to soothe a cub.

But she wasn't a cub, and she didn't want to be soothed. "Yes I'm hurt. But not from you throwing me. You wouldn't hurt me physically, and don't try to scare me into believing that you would."

His eyes glowed like onyx when he opened them and stared down at her. "Rosa, you've pushed me too far. I shouldn't have stopped that male earlier up at the stream."

"Like hell you shouldn't have." She pressed her palms against his chest, feeling the hard beating of his heart and the quick breaths he took. "You told me to meet you here. In fact, you demanded it. Why would you do that unless you wanted me?"

When he reached for her hair, this time he stroked it so gently that tears threatened to burn her eyes. But letting her emotions tangle up this conversation would make it even harder to say what needed said. What they both needed to say. She fought not to move, not to blink or even think while he slowly petted her hair and said nothing for a minute.

"Of course I want to fuck you. You know that," he growled. "Taking you tonight wouldn't be fucking, though. We've moved beyond that."

"And that scares you," she prompted.

His attention shifted from his hand stroking her hair to her face. His stare bore into hers, holding her captive until she finally remembered to breathe. And he didn't look away.

Her reaction time was way off tonight. Once again she didn't anticipate him leaping forward, crushing her against the wall behind her and tangling his hands in her hair as he devoured her mouth.

His kiss was crushing, demanding, insistent upon her submission and taking everything she had and then some. His tongue speared its way past her teeth, warring

with her tongue with an aggression that matched the passion she always knew ran deep in his blood.

Dimitri pressed his body against hers, releasing a deep, hard growl as he forced her mouth open further, continuing to feast on her until she swore she would melt into a puddle at his feet.

He was right. And even if she had been too brain-boggled earlier to think it through herself, they wouldn't just be fucking tonight. No matter the barrier he had fought to build around himself when he first brought her into his den, his scent ripened until it intoxicated her. And she smelled her own scent too.

They were mating. Whether he would voice it with words or not, his actions and the aroma drifting from his pores made it real damned clear.

If he made love to her like he predicted he would and didn't announce their mating, she would die. That thought sobered her.

She twisted her head, suddenly needing air. It took a moment before he reacted to her resistance. Breaking the kiss as suddenly as he instigated it, he raised his head, gazing over her head while she rested against the wall and panted.

"I don't have any resistance with you." His body pressed against hers, hardening her nipples painfully as the material from his shirt brushed over them.

"I've never had any resistance when it came to you." There wasn't much room between him and the wall, but she did her best to rub herself against him, need racing inside her when she felt his hard body with hers.

Dimitri gripped her jaw, raising her head and looking down at her. "That doesn't make me very strong then, now does it?"

"It makes you a werewolf," she whispered, relaxing in his grip.

Dark, thick lashes hooded his deep, intense gaze. "But I know things about me, things you obviously haven't sniffed out, or dug deep enough into my brain to find out."

"What? That you can feel pain? Dimitri, that shows me how deeply you know how to love."

"No. It doesn't. My heart is broken, Rosa. Can't you see that?"

"That would mean you have no compassion, which would make you a pretty shitty pack leader." She couldn't shake her head very well with his fingers pressing into her jawbone, but she tried. "And you're a damned good pack leader, wolf man."

Her heart thudded in her chest too hard for her to keep speaking. Never in her life had she spoken so boldly, so openly to a werewolf. Dimitri scowled down at her, his thoughts raging so loud there was no escaping them.

Why does she continually compare leading a pack to mating?

She dared smile at him, knowing she would deal with his wrath for answering his mind. "Because both take a strong werewolf, both require your love and devotion, and both are until death."

He licked his lips, his fingers tightening over her jaw and then easing slightly as he slowly stroked her flesh.

"One requires that I care for many. The other demands that I howl for only one."

"And you don't think you can do that?"

I know that I can. But that doesn't mean that I can love.

She opened her mouth, ready to answer his mind again, but he looked away, relaxing his hand and then lowering it to her neck. Stepping back mere inches, he lowered his gaze to her nakedness and then brushed his knuckles over one nipple.

"I never have," he confessed quietly, his voice suddenly so hoarse that he sounded like the change threatened him. "Maybe the pain inside me is from missing out and having those close to me burnt to a crisp before I could truly open up to them."

"Regret doesn't mean you didn't love."

He shook his head, backing off and leaving her standing alone again, instantly missing the warmth of his body. She needed his touch, craved touching him, even if it had been only a second since their bodies pressed against each other. Walking toward him like he was a magnet, she continued following him when he moved across the room.

"You didn't grow up on Malta. You don't know."

"I know you," she whispered, her heart hurting when she smelled the pain coming from him. She stopped when suddenly glimpses of burning buildings, of screams and pleas for help appeared in his mind. The intensity of what he showed her, although it lasted only a second before he shoved it out of his head, froze her where she stood.

"You don't know me." He left her in his living room, walking into his bedroom.

There was no way she would stand in the dark and cold by herself. When she reached his doorway, he'd already stripped his shirt from his body. Sitting on his bed, he reached for his boots, loosening one and then the other. Slowly he pulled them off and tossed them to the side. His socks came off next. Rosa walked across his cold floor, feeling the chill in the room and knowing the only source of heat came from him.

"What I do know of you appeals to me."

"Appeals?" he challenged, lifting his head and raising one eyebrow. His gaze dropped instantly, taking in her nudity when she stepped close enough that her bare feet touched his toes. "You don't strike me as the kind of bitch who mates with a male simply because he appeals to her."

"Do I strike you as the kind of bitch who lies?" Already fire burned her cheeks as she heard his thoughts.

She can't say that she loves me because she doesn't. I'll prove to her this is lust and that will be the end of it.

Dimitri stood, fingering the top button on his jeans and then unzipping them. "I've never smelled a lie on you."

"Nor will you. You want me to tell you that I love you. And you're right, mating is about love. Dimitri." She paused, searching for the right way to speak her thoughts. "You're always on my mind. I smell you no matter where I go or what I'm doing. And I don't accept that it's just lust. Maybe it's the beginning of love." She whispered her last sentence, unable to raise her gaze from his hands as they pushed his jeans down his muscular thighs.

He stepped out of his jeans and left them crumpled on the floor when he returned to his bed. Pulling back the blankets, he stretched out before her, his cock rock hard and swollen as it stood at attention. Her mouth turned parched just staring at the smooth skin that stretched over the steel underneath it.

"No one will ever accuse me of not having honor. I won't have it. For that reason, I could never force you into a mating where there was no love."

"Force me?" she asked, crawling onto the bed next to him and then leaning back on her heels as she watched him reach for his cock. More than anything she wanted her hand where his was. "How could you possibly feel you're forcing me?"

"You didn't ask me to swell inside you. And you never hinted that you needed protection from the male out on the run."

Watching him slowly stroke his cock was making her nuts. She slid closer to him, touching his warm thigh and feeling the coarse hairs tickle her fingertips. "Then why did you do those things?"

"I don't know."

She thought he might know. Daring to move closer, she brushed her hair over her shoulder and out of her way, then brought her mouth to his cock. His hand moved as if it knew her thoughts and got out of the way for her. His scent filled her nostrils, the aroma heady and strong enough to tilt her world for a moment. Her fingers wrapped around his thick, hard shaft without instruction. Pulling him to her mouth, she pressed his swollen, smooth head against her lips and focused on his face. "Maybe you did those things because you have feelings for me," she whispered, moving her lips against his cock as she spoke.

His entire body tensed and his hand quickly moved to her head, applying enough pressure so that he slid deeper into her mouth.

"And maybe I'm just a selfish son of a bitch who's found something so good that I don't want to share." He didn't let her comment. Gripping her head with both hands, he thrust upward so that his cock slid into her throat until she almost gagged.

She could have turned her head. She could have forced the conversation to continue. But she too had found someone so perfect that she didn't want to share. And whether Dimitri realized it or not, he had just voiced his reasons for not being able to leave her alone. He could be as selfish as he wanted with her. She didn't mind a bit.

He didn't stop her from raising her head until he was barely in her mouth. Then sucking him in as far as she could, she circled her tongue around him, moistening his shaft, and then took him in deeper.

Dimitri growled, a low, menacing sound. He released her head and clawed at the blankets on either side of him while arching his body, tensing completely while his cock grew and stretched in her mouth.

Her lips tingled, creating a sensation that rushed over her body. She straddled his leg, wanting to ride him, rub herself against his skin and seek her own satisfaction while pleasing him. He moved in and out of her, and the curve at the top of his cock pressed her mouth further open, then entered and allowed her to close her lips over him.

Her lashes fluttered and her eyes watered from taking him so deep, but she forced her gaze up, needing to see his face. The strain in his expression was enough to show her that he loved what she did to him. His scent grew muskier, richer and thick, like hot, melting chocolate that she couldn't wait to taste.

And as if he heard her thoughts, her mouth suddenly filled with a creamy saltiness. His pre-cum got her so excited that she bucked against his leg. Dimitri lifted his head, moving his hands to her shoulders and slowly kneading her muscles.

"You really don't want me swelling in your mouth." He grabbed her under her arms, lifting her until his cock slipped out of her mouth. "Come here."

As he pulled her up his body, she stretched her legs, which added to the thick smell of lust already floating around them. She pulled her knees forward and braced her feet on either side of him so that she knelt doggy-style, with him underneath her. Their eyes locked and the intensity of his gaze made her heart swell. Dimitri gazed at her like a werewolf deeply in love. Not that she ever had a male look at her like Dimitri did now. But the way his look made her heart patter, her belly suddenly flutter and every inch of her tingle was all she needed to know.

And his thoughts, so warm she could cuddle into them and be content for hours, got her as excited as all the hard packed muscle underneath her.

God, those are perfect fucking tits. And the way she's crawling over me, like I'm her meal and she's starving. Perfect...just perfect...like a...Queen. Shit.

She lowered her head as his hands rubbed up her arms and nipped at his neck, dragging her teeth over the flesh above his collarbone. The rich, sweet smell of his lust seeped from his pores and filled her mouth. She inhaled deeply, filling her lungs with his intoxicating smell. Mixed with the saltiness of his pre-cum, he was a feast. And she needed more of him.

"You need me bad, little bitch."

Sometimes she really believed he understood her a lot better than he let on. He cupped her breasts, squeezing them until a tingling sensation shot straight through her to her pussy. He pulled her up by her breasts until he positioned her where he wanted her. His cock throbbed, full and eager at the entrance of her heat.

"Please," she breathed and then ran her tongue up the side of his neck.

"Shit," he hissed. "Take what you want. You ride me."

He wanted her to do the work. Her mind tangled around her lust and need. She could do this. Make her limbs work, get herself focused. It was the only way she would bring the pressure building inside her to a point where she could think straight again.

Pushing with her arms, she straightened over him. Dimitri held on to her breasts, focusing on them when she put distance between the upper halves of their bodies. Still his scent consumed her, saturating every inch of her lungs. If she walked away right now, she was sure he would still be all she would smell.

Adjusting her legs, she reached between them, pushing her breasts closer together when she grabbed his cock. Dimitri hissed, his lips barely parted and his white teeth seeming like they glowed against his dark skin.

"Don't move," she told him, forcing his gaze to her face. "If I'm doing the work, then I'm in charge."

"You think?" he said, his black hair fanning over his white pillowcase.

Even relaxed, his expression almost as if he were asleep, he looked deadly as hell. His chest rose and fell slowly, the well-developed muscles under his skin shifting slightly as he moved his arms. His hands stayed on her breasts, stroking them and flicking at her nipples while his gaze looked almost lazy, content, willing her to do what she would. Yet he made no promises that she controlled the outcome.

For some reason that got her even hotter. "Yes, I do think," she whispered, squeezing his cock in her hand while pressing his swollen head against the entrance of her pussy. "Don't move."

"Fuck me, little bitch," he ordered.

His cock twitched when she slowly slid down on it, but he didn't move. She stared into his face, watching his expression tighten as his mouth closed and his lips pressed together. When his lashes fluttered over his dark eyes and then closed, she gripped his wrists and glided down the rest of the way on him.

God. He filled and stretched her to where she couldn't move. And she wanted to control this show? The smell of sex, so rich and intoxicating, spun her world around. Every inch of her tightened, while her legs shook and threatened to give out underneath her. She used his arms to balance herself, holding on for dear life, and pressed her bare feet flat into the bed, then did her best to lift off him.

That long, thick cock stroked and tortured every tiny, soaked muscle inside her. Her vision blurred, everything before her turning to a warm array of colors and smells. When she remembered to breathe it dawned on her that she did control the show. She moved up and down, her leg muscles burning, but she didn't care. His cock hit right where she needed it, and with enough force that she drifted into a world of pure sensations.

Dimitri's hands moved to her waist, and it took her a minute to realize he held her upright, controlling her motions when she thought she was the one in charge. There was no stopping the rhythm. It felt too damned good.

She sucked in a breath and then blew it out as she hummed, loving what he did to her insides. Her inner thighs strained as she rode him harder, her hair falling over her face and making her feel as wild as if she were in her fur and running as fast as her legs would take her. The pleasure of it filled her, brimming over until she exploded. Millions of tiny lights popped in front of her eyes. She cried out – at least she was pretty sure she did. Everything around her spun out of control as her world flipped over.

And once again she was so into how he made her feel she didn't hear his thoughts or know his actions before he did them. With a quick, fluid movement, Dimitri raised up off the bed, wrapping her in his arms, and then leaned over her until she lay flat with him on top of her.

"Oh shit." She almost bit her tongue when he sunk even deeper inside her.

And there was no moving to ease the new pressure he created.

"You like that, do you?" His voice was garbled and his hair was wild around his face like it was windblown.

She gazed up with blurred vision and nodded slowly, managing to move her hand and brush her hair from her face. "Hell yeah, wolf man. I love it."

He raised an eyebrow, and something in his thoughts put her on guard. Her brain was still lost in a fuzz, making it too difficult to pick up on what was on his mind. Not to mention she was sure he wasn't thinking coherently, like he was as drunk on her as she was on him.

But she sobered quickly when he pulled out of her. Muscles bulged throughout his body as he knelt between her legs and grabbed her inner thighs, spreading her further open.

"You are so damned wet. Do you know how hard you just came?"

"I think so." She looked past her hard nipples and round breasts toward her pussy, as he lifted her legs and pulled her ass off the bed. "What are you doing?"

"How much will you give me?" he asked.

She stared up at him.

I want your ass.

"Oh." Suddenly his thoughts were very clear. Maybe he had figured out how to think in mumbo-jumbo or something so she wouldn't understand his motives until he wanted her to. "I've never done that. I mean, it will hurt."

"If it does, I'll stop," he told her with so much sincerity he made it sound like a question and a promise all at once.

She nodded, biting her lower lip. Her insides twisted with a nervous anticipation that changed the aroma in the room quickly.

Dimitri lowered his face to hers, taking her lip and sucking it into his mouth, then kissed her soundly. It was sensual, hot, scorching not only her lips but every inch of her.

"Relax, little bitch, and trust me not to hurt you," he whispered, soaking her cheek with his hot mouth as he spoke. *Show me that emotion I see all over your face and in the richness of your scent.*

Could he smell her love?

His cock and balls were damp and heavy as they brushed against her rear end. With every touch, her senses heightened, her insides twisting with need to explode again while she imagined what it would be like to have him in such an intimate way.

Would it bond them even closer together? Maybe that's what he wanted. His fingers brushed down her neck, stroking her shoulders and then her breasts. She could say no. If she did, it wouldn't change anything between them. That much was clear in her mind.

But her heightened need, every inch of her tingling like one giant nerve ending, overexposed and raw, put her in a place where sex of any kind sounded too damned good to pass up.

"I trust you," she told him, her mouth suddenly too dry.

He moved his hand down further, first stroking her soaked pussy so that she jumped. "You are on fire. Give me your hand. Feel how hot you are."

Dimitri wrapped his fingers around her wrist, pressing against her pulse, which beat as hard in her arm as it did in her chest, and placed her fingers over her well-fucked pussy. Slowly she stroked herself, pushing inside and then spreading her juices over her warm, smooth flesh.

He growled at her actions, which elevated her sense of power, and she finger-fucked herself more, watching as his breathing grew heavier and louder while his gaze remained locked on her. She pushed her index finger over her clit, the little knob several times its normal size and also capturing the beat of her heart. The small amount of applied pressure gave her another orgasm. It didn't possess the strength of when he was inside her, but she came hard enough to double over. She rolled back and forth until the waves of lust subsided and her breathing returned to normal.

But then she realized where his cock was. Soaked and pressing against her tight, virgin hole. Her gaze shot to his. Eyes blacker than a starless night stared down at her, watching her like a predator would right before attacking. And there was no escape.

"Breathe," he told her, pushing slightly into her entrance.

Tiny little nerves sprang to life, adding a new sensation that she hadn't felt before.

She sucked in a breath and blew it out.

"Now relax your muscles. All of them. Make your body calm, like you're floating, and trust me, my sweet bitch. Give all you have to me and know that I won't hurt you."

His words had a calm control to them that urged her to follow his instructions. Never taking her gaze from his, she forced her breathing to slow, concentrating on her body and making it soft and relaxed.

"If you don't like it, I'll stop," he reminded her.

"It's okay." She blew out a breath, wondering if it would be.

And then his warm, sticky cock pushed inside her. One quick, fluid movement and he broke through a barrier of tight muscles that stretched with a sting so intense her eyes watered as she gasped, instantly forgetting all of his instructions.

"Keep your finger on your clit. Rub it slowly and look at me." He spoke as he began moving, and his expression tightened until his jaw appeared locked and the only way he could speak was through his teeth.

He never looked away from her, building the momentum, creating a pressure that would knock her out. She pressed her fingers against her clit, rubbed her moist pussy and watched his face while his muscles bulged and veins looked like they would pop in his neck. His movements grew as his cock slowly glided in and out of her ass.

Nothing could compare with the sensations riding her insides. He split her in two yet filled her with a passion and feelings she'd never felt before. Every inch of her tingled. He reached and touched parts of her she didn't know could be given so much pleasure.

"Little bitch," he growled as tiny beads of sweat appeared above his eyebrows. His chest glistened with moisture, making him look smooth as satin.

Yet what he did to her insides was anything but satiny. It was more like leather, hard and hot, igniting and exploding all at the same time. Something shattered inside her, and for a moment she panicked that he had swelled inside her. But it wasn't pain.

"Dimitri," she screamed, unable to take the pressure and sensations attacking her any longer. She reached for him, certain she clawed flesh from his chest as her world erupted into a million colors of hot reds and then hotter crimsons.

Dimitri pulled out, taking all the sensations with him, and exploded on her belly. The hot cream singed her skin and filled the air with its rich, musky scent. He fell backward, holding his still swollen cock. His hair was wild around his face and his expression a mask of too many emotions.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes." She was more than okay.

"And no male has ever done that to you before?"

"No."

And no other werewolf ever will. His thoughts were so clear she swore he spoke out loud. Standing, he didn't say another word, but walked naked to the bathroom. Too exhausted to move, Rosa willed her body to rise off the bed, turn around and relax with her head on the pillow. Dimitri returned, his cock still hard and throbbing between his legs. He ignored it, although it looked heavy and almost uncomfortable, and instead applied a dry hand towel to her stomach, taking his time cleaning her. He didn't ask her how she turned her body so quickly, and she was too tired to search his mind. She was happy and sated when he crawled into the bed with her and then pulled the blankets over both of them.

Chapter Twelve

Sometimes dreams sucked. Dimitri was stiff, and rolling over sounded painful. Every muscle in his body seemed racked in pain. And after such wonderful sex, every breath smelling of Rosa, this was the last dream he wanted to have.

Bruno Tangaree's house was always full of happiness, the white walls clean and throw carpets on the floor smelling like every flake of dust had just been beaten out of them. Dimitri wasn't the oldest, but he led the way for his littermates to the room all of them loved visiting.

Renee, their queen bitch, still called them cubs, even though Dimitri was sixteen and stood several inches taller than she did. She stopped him with a stern, motherly look before they made it too far into her den. Dimitri raised his bare feet, along with his littermates, so she could ensure none of them tracked mud through her den.

"He's in there – go on and behave." Renee's laughter was prettier than any music he ever heard in the evenings down at the docks.

Dimitri held hands with his youngest littermates, the twins, Maria and Marco. Erin made the door to Bruno's special room open before they reached it.

"Show off!" Theresa – his younger littermate, barely eight years old at the time – accused and pulled on Erin's long braid.

Erin growled, thrusting her pudgy hand out and baring her fangs. She wasn't even six years old. Dimitri saw her baby face in his dreams, so young and full of life, spoiled beyond belief since she took to the gift so quickly. No one would ever smell the jealousy he felt over that little bitch, the only one of all his littermates who mastered the gift like she was born with it.

"My favorite den!" Bruno smiled at the lot of them as if he had sired them himself.

Dimitri let go of the twins, keeping an eye on them but anxious to see what Bruno was doing today. The large werewolf was always at his den, always had time for them, unlike his own sire, who worked from dawn until way after dusk down at the fishery. Although many his age already worked alongside their sires, Dimitri helped keep an eye on his younger littermates, giving their mother time for an afternoon nap and much needed alone time. Besides, he wanted more than to just work at a fishery all of his life. Bruno was what Dimitri ached to be someday – the boss, in charge, a pack leader. And coming here once a week made him believe that dream would come true. Not a soul in his pack knew of his craving to lead, and that was how it would remain until he was ready. And he wouldn't challenge Bruno, not ever. He loved the werewolf like his own sire. But someday, when the incredible werewolf stepped down – he would never die – then Dimitri would be ready.

"I've worked hard all week at everything you told me," Dimitri said, watching the large werewolf closely for any signs of pride.

Bruno patted Dimitri's shoulder. "I know you have. Every time the fire burns brighter in my hearth, I know it's because you are closer to mastering the elements."

Dimitri beamed. Glancing at the large fireplace at the end of the room, which was dark and sooty although no fire burned today since it was so warm and sunny outside. Nonetheless, he smelled the flames, saw them in his mind.

The dream turned dark. Dimitri fought not to remember, not to let the terrible day resurface, but his mind ignored his orders. Kicking the covers off him, his body stretched, feeling the warmth of Rosa lying next to him. He ached to roll over onto her, regain control of his mind and enjoy the softness of her luscious curves, but his dream tugged at his brain.

Flames. Always the damned fucking flames. He fought the dream—hated the dream. How many years would he live before a fire didn't affect him or bring back that horrible day? If only Bruno believed in him, trusted that eventually he would figure it out. And why the hell couldn't he master the gift? What the fuck was wrong with him?

If he only figured out what his five-year-old littermate understood within minutes of being exposed to it, then he would have been Bruno's assistant instead of that waste of werewolf flesh, Dante Aldo.

It should have been him.

It was supposed to be him.

Bruno wanted Dimitri for his assistant. But he chose Dante. Dimitri couldn't master the gift. Hating the dream even as it played before his eyes, he wished more than anything he would just wake up.

"You know you aren't allowed to go up there." Moira Tangaree stood at the bottom of the stairs that led up to her sire's special rooms. The teenage bitch would make werewolves forget their names when she got older.

"Something is wrong," she continued. Her thick black hair tumbled down her thin back when she turned and stared up the flight of stairs. "I wasn't supposed to hear him and mother this morning. They are sending messengers around to the dens, warning them of something. My sire is pissed. He needs more werewolves to warn the dens."

"I can help." Dimitri refused to sound too eager in front of the young bitch.

Her black eyes sparked when she turned around quickly. "You aren't allowed to go up there either, Dimitri Spalto. Don't play like you're anyone important. If I can't go up there, don't think for a minute I'll let you up those stairs."

He could throw her out of the way. It would be so easy to do. He hated more than anything that she spoke the truth. Over the past few months, Bruno had changed. All of his good humor and joviality was gone. Even at the last pack meeting, he didn't laugh once. He never looked at Dimitri. And he chose another werewolf, a male who hadn't even grown up with the pack, to work alongside him. Dimitri knew Moira didn't know the other male. Her sire wouldn't allow her to have anything to do with his private work. As much as Dimitri ached to order her to move, he wouldn't defy the wishes of Bruno. If he went up those stairs, Moira would follow him.

He stormed out of the Tangaree den, marching down the street, which for the middle of the afternoon seemed unusually quiet.

"Where are your littermates?" His sire met him at the corner with Dimitri's oldest littermate, Nicolo, by his side. Both of them reeked of fish.

"School isn't out yet, father."

"Bruno's assistant showed up at the fishery with orders that we were all to head to our dens. You know anything about this, Dimitri?"

It was wrong that he didn't. With every ounce of blood that pumped too hard through his veins, he felt how wrong it was that Bruno allowed Dante Aldo to be his assistant and not Dimitri.

"I'll find out." He turned around and marched back to the Tangaree den. Bruno would see him. He would demand it. And fortunately, when he stormed back inside the den that was like a second home to him, that spitfire little bitch, Moira, wasn't there to boss him around. "Bruno?"

Dimitri swore he called his old pack leader's name out in his sleep. He rolled over, feeling the blankets tangle around his feet, and nudged Rosa's warm body. Nothing like what had happened in his past would ever happen again. He wrapped his arm around her, feeling her soft bottom press against his still-damp cock. But his dream pulled him under too quickly to focus on how good she felt lying next to him.

"Where is my daughter? Where is Dante?" Bruno's pissed off voice bellowed through his den.

Dimitri paused in the doorway, smelling the animosity. Never before had he hesitated to enter this den. But the happiness, the warm aromas that always greeted him were gone. Something was wrong, terribly wrong.

"He's supposed to be warning the God damned dens. They will die. All of them will fucking die. I need someone out there warning them. Someone fast enough to race from one den to the next. Where the hell is Dante?"

It was the worst part of the dream. He didn't want to relive it. More than anything he wanted to wake up, run from his bed.

And he did run. He turned around and stormed out of that den, mad as hell that Bruno howled for Dante and not him. And if it were him, Bruno wouldn't be pissed right now. Dimitri would have been there when Bruno needed him.

In his dream he ran as fast as his legs would take him. Bruno's outrage pissed him off so bad that he ached to change, to run to the cliffs and not stop running until exhaustion cleansed the anger from his body. He didn't know what was going on. All he knew was that Bruno was pissed as hell, and it was all Dante's fault. Served the ugly bastard right. He didn't deserve to be Bruno's assistant anyway. Maybe now Bruno would see that Dimitri would be the better werewolf. Dante would fuck it all up and Bruno would sniff out Dimitri the next time he had an urgent message to tell all the dens.

He ran to the sea, that beautiful green sea that was always so tranquil, so peaceful and beautiful. Just staring at it, inhaling the warm, relaxing, familiar scent helped calm his racing heart. In spite of all the humans around him ignoring the dark-skinned young male with long black hair that blew off his back with the ocean breeze, he loved being down at the docks and just focusing on the routine that would never change.

He spotted his sister at the same time that he picked up an unusual scent. Ignoring the smell at first, he marched over to his younger littermate, puffing out his chest just the way his sire would.

"You're not in school." He ignored the way she made the fish jump out of the water just by staring at them. "And you're busted. Get your ass back where it belongs."

Erin turned around with that defiant look she always wore on her face, but then turned her attention toward the town.

"Something is wrong," she whispered.

"You're damned straight. You keep skipping class and our sire will take his belt to you."

"No. Dimitri. Look."

Black smoke made incredibly odd-shaped clouds in the sky just above his pack's part of town. Dimitri barely acknowledged his younger littermate slipping her smaller hand into his as he stared in horror at the fire that spread quickly. He pulled her alongside him, barely aware that he held on to her as he walked up the street as far as he dared, listening as the screams increased and his pack started running around with their tails between their legs.

"No!" Jumping out of the bed, Dimitri scrubbed his head with his hands and wiped the unbearable memory out of his head. He wouldn't remember.

Anger and outrage made his body shake. Slowly gulping in air, he willed his heartbeat to calm down. It took several really deep breaths before he acknowledged that he inhaled Rosa's scent. Turning around, he stared at her slender back and her messed up long black hair as she sat on the other side of the bed. She didn't face him but had her legs hanging off the side and her head in her hands as if...

"Shit." He would die if she were in his head throughout that entire terrible dream.

The floor was cold under his feet as he walked naked around the bed until he faced her. She didn't look up at him. Standing there for a moment, studying her, he breathed in the salty smell of her tears. Oh Lord.

There wasn't much compassion inside him, and right now Rosa needed just that. Just when he believed that she was possibly the bitch for him, he watched her cry, knowing she now understood the horrible errors of his past.

Slowly she shook her head. "No. No, Dimitri."

She didn't look very stable when she pushed herself off the bed. Remembering her telling him last night that she'd never had anal sex before, he realized that more than likely her body was more than a little sore this morning. Dimitri pulled her into his arms and then held her too tightly. Even when he worried he might hurt her, he couldn't let go of her.

"Dreams are a mass of torn up memories." He tried desperately to put everything back to right. If only he had taken her back to her den last night. But if he had, he would have kept her here another night and she would have eventually experienced the nightmare that to this day wouldn't leave him alone. "Did you experience the dream I just had with me?"

She didn't try moving out of his arms, but slowly nodded her head.

"Damn it." What could he say to make her believe it didn't happen that way?

No. He wouldn't lie to her.

"Maybe it's best that you learn the truth about me now." No other werewolf on the planet knew this about him. "Dante Aldo fucked up on that terrible day. But I ran like a cub with my tail between my legs. My cowardice killed my den and our pack."

"I saw it in my mind like I dreamed it too." She shook, her entire body quivering against him like she couldn't get warm.

And he didn't blame her. She'd just experienced the nightmare for the first time that he had been living now for almost six years.

"My sweet little bitch." He stroked her hair, brushing it from her face as he relaxed his grip on her and then cupped her cheeks until he saw how her moist lashes clung together and the salty smell of her sadness wrapped around the still strong scent of their lovemaking from the night before. "I was old enough to know better, and to not be scared of the angry aggression of another werewolf."

"He was your pack leader. Your loyalty to him was so strong that if he were alive now, you would submit to his commands."

She was right. But that didn't change the facts of history. "I should have found out why he was pissed at Dante Aldo. I could have run to every den and warned them. So many lives would have been saved that day. My den, mother and my sire—I would have saved all of them."

She stiffened in his arms, then pushed him to arm's length. Even though her eyes were so moist they glowed like beautiful gems, she grabbed his arms, making an effort to shake him.

"Dimitri Spalto." Her voice was harsher than he had ever heard her speak before. "You can't continue blaming yourself for the past. You did the best that you could that day. And look what you have done since. Weren't you and your littermates the first to arrive here on the mountain when you heard news that Dante Aldo was here?"

"I came here to kill him."

Rosa nodded slowly, then let go of his arm to run her fingers over her face. "And you came here to help build a pack for all of us. Look at what you have accomplished."

"There is still so much to do."

"And you'll do it."

God. She believed in him more than he did himself. Pulling her back into his arms, he kissed her forehead, breathing in deeply the smell of him on her. There would be no way he could allow her to walk among their pack now without making some sort of announcement concerning her.

Hell. He wanted to make that announcement. Rosa was his bitch. Why not howl it to the world?

"You need a shower," he decided. Turning her around, he kept her tucked in next to him as he walked with her to the bathroom.

Rosa didn't say anything but stood in the bathroom, waiting as he adjusted the water and then the shower curtain. Her eyes were dry now as she looked up at him and then took his hand as he helped her into the bath.

The water streamed over her hair, soaking it and making it cling to her, looking flatter and shinier as she closed her eyes and arched under the showerhead. He didn't want to move, or even blink, content to simply watch her beautiful body as paths of water made curvy lines over her full breasts and down the slender slope of her hips.

Grabbing the soap, he lathered it in his hands and then bathed her, taking his time to make sure every inch of her was clean. Just as he would his mate.

His female. His bitch.

Dimitri meticulously took his time cleaning every inch of her, adoring her beauty. He would care for her and protect her with his last breath. God only knew why he was blessed with such perfection, but nothing—nothing—would ever bring her pain.

The thought hit him so hard it was as if he were just punched in the gut. Rosa didn't move, didn't stop him from bathing her and gave no indication that she followed his line of thinking.

But he knew better.

"Now that you know the truth about me, what do you think?" If he could improve on any of the many fucked up traits of his personality, he wouldn't be selfish. Rosa deserved that much out of him. He wouldn't mate with her if she saw the truth of what made him who he was and didn't like it.

Pain speared through him at a deadly pace when she didn't answer right away.

She stood perfectly still while he gathered up all her hair and worked shampoo into it. He would wait out her silence and hear her answer. Her hair was so thick and so long as it tumbled over his fingers. No one ever would have made him believe that cleaning a bitch could be such a wonderful experience. He tried focusing on that instead of the ache that filled his gut as the silence between them lengthened.

"Why did you run toward the fire instead of away from it?" she asked, and then spit soap away from her mouth when he pushed her under the water.

"I had eight littermates," he told her, running his fingers through her hair and watching the suds stream down her back and arms.

His cock got hard watching the white streams of suds flow over her dark skin. She would be too tender this morning though, and he fought his urge to avoid this conversation and simply fuck her instead.

"A coward would have sniffed out his own safety." She opened one eye and stared up at him. "I think the same of you that I've thought since I first smelled you, Dimitri. You're an incredible werewolf."

It was only right that he make her see the truth. "I was too wrapped up in my jealousy over Dante. My own pride made me storm out of Bruno's den that day. I should have confronted him and demanded that he allow me to help when he couldn't find Dante."

Her hair lay flat against her head and she looked up at him with water clinging to her lashes. Dimitri didn't move when she put her hands on his shoulders and then went up on her tiptoes and kissed him. Her lips were warm and her scent smelled so much like him that it made his heart swell with such an odd sensation of pride.

"Dante and Juan have a lot of regrets about that day too. I'm afraid the terrible truth is that the fires were started too quickly, by too many werewolves, for any of you to prevent all those deaths from happening." She spoke with her lips against his, her breath mingling with his.

He ran his hands down her slender arms, feeling her small muscles and knowing they offered no indication of how much power and strength ran through his little bitch.

"I could have saved my den."

"Maybe. And I'm so sorry that they all died. So very sorry." She held him close, like a mother would her cub.

When her scent grew richer and she reached and scratched her nails over his scalp, her clean, fresh scent brought back memories of the way his parents used to smell. The smell of love.

Chapter Thirteen

Rosa walked into her den knowing what to expect before she spotted her mother. "There you are." Her cheerful tone wouldn't curb Maria Anthony's biting tongue.

The older bitch stuffed a strand of gray hair behind her ear as she looked up, eyeing Rosa first, then looking past her at Dimitri.

"By the smell of you two, I assume you come to my den to bring an old bitch good news. Especially since you didn't return to your den last night."

"When there's good news, you'll hear about it before you have a chance to ask." Rosa leaned forward to kiss her mother, who sat with the newspaper spread before her at the kitchen table.

Maria pushed Rosa's arm, using the gesture to help herself stand. Then applying more force than Rosa guessed her mother had used in years, she shoved Rosa out of the way and walked up to Dimitri. The top of her mother's head didn't even come to his shoulders. For some strange reason, at the moment she looked very powerful even though he seriously dwarfed her.

"Are you going to mate with my daughter?" she demanded to know.

Rosa covered her face with her hand, doing her best to stifle the smell of her sudden embarrassment and humiliation.

"Yes." Dimitri's response knocked her a few paces backward.

Weren't either one of them thinking at all before they spoke?

The refrigerator stopped her backward journey and her hand fell to grip the handle as she gaped at Dimitri. He didn't look up at her. But her mother spun around, as if the news had just been announced, and she almost squealed as she rammed into her daughter.

Rosa caught her mother, accepting her embrace as she looked over her and up at Dimitri. His expression wasn't readable, but his thoughts were.

Get the things you came for and let's get out of here.

Oh yeah, right. Like they could just prance out of here after what he had just said to her mother. But she couldn't answer him with her thoughts.

"Mother," she said, managing to pry the older bitch off her.

"You will be queen bitch!" She clasped her hands in front of her, beaming with so much pride it filled the kitchen with its ripe smell.

"Mom." Rosa had a few choice words for Dimitri right about now. She told him as much with her glare.

Werewolves were a stubborn species. Thankfully, he took the hint.

"Maria, there is no announcement to make yet." His tone was so calm, as if he just told her that there wouldn't be a run tonight.

"What is this?" Maria turned slowly, giving Rosa a quick look before settling her attention on Dimitri. "Males and bitches today have sex without mating?"

"I didn't say that." He looked a bit uncomfortable.

Rosa cocked her head, deciding he could get accustomed to Maria's sharp tongue on his own.

"Then help an old bitch out here. What exactly are you saying?"

"Mating is a very serious step and one I don't take lightly." If he thought deepening his voice and trying to sound authoritative would help matters, he would soon learn how Maria Anthony did business.

"So it's just the sex that you take lightly?"

Are you going to help me out here? His thoughts were loud enough that it was as if he shouted at her.

She raised her eyebrows, dying to hear him answer her mother's questions. "Mom, I came over here to get some things. And to say hello and let you know that I'm fine. Is there anything that you need?"

"Yes. There is. I need to know right now if you plan on dishonoring my daughter." Maria poked her finger into Dimitri's chest. "I don't care if you are pack leader or not, werewolf. If my Rosa puts one paw outside our den smelling like she does with no mating to announce, then she will be tarnished. So unless there is some new law about fornicating without mating that an old bitch missed out on, I want to hear some news."

Dimitri looked more uncomfortable than Rosa had ever seen him. "I haven't discussed mating with her yet," he admitted.

"She doesn't leave this den until you do." Maria put her hands on her hips and glared up at him.

Dimitri stared at Maria for a long moment. He never looked at Rosa, but his warring thoughts made her stomach churn. He turned around and walked out of the den, closing the door slowly behind him.

"Mom!" She wouldn't let him leave without her. "Dimitri!" she yelled, hurrying toward the front door.

"Don't you dare chase after that werewolf." Maria sounded more forceful than she had in years.

Rosa stumbled over her feet, torn between obeying her mother and racing after Dimitri. She stopped at the door, feeling her fingernails prick her palms when she fisted her hands and fought the urge to pound the wood in front of her.

"He'll be back."

Rosa spun around. "How do you know?"

"I know."

The door hit her in the back when it opened. Rosa got dizzy turning around again so quickly.

Dimitri's eyes were darker than night when he looked down at her. "Rosa." He choked on her name.

Her heart swelled into her throat, making it impossible to answer him.

Be my mate. His thoughts hit her but his mouth opened, then closed again. Then opened. *I want you to be my mate.* He didn't speak. *Rosa, would you mate with me?*

"Dimitri?" she whispered. God, if he would just speak.

"Mating should only happen if a male and a bitch love each other," he said quickly.

That wasn't in his thoughts. She nodded once dumbly.

"I wouldn't honor a mating any other way." He straightened, suddenly sounding serious, like he was giving a speech.

I think we would make it if we mated. His thoughts spilled over each other, various word orders of the same sentence tangling around in his mind.

Rosa smelled amusement trickling off her mother and wanted to kick her out of the room. She swallowed the lump in her throat, closing her eyes and trying to focus on her own thoughts. So much was shared between the two of them in his den last night and this morning.

But love?

Slowly she turned around. The broad grin on her mother's face disappeared quickly.

"Mom. Please allow us a few minutes alone," she said quietly, grateful that she sounded calm.

"You will honor my instructions." Her mother pointed a knowing finger at her.

"I won't leave," she told her.

Maria nodded once and left the room. Rosa let out a long sigh before turning around. The dark, brooding stare on Dimitri's face ripped all air out of her lungs. Her mouth went completely dry simply staring at him. He didn't look this serious even when he discussed his dream with her.

"Leaving you here under your mother's terms brings you dishonor."

"Hell, Dimitri. You told her you would mate with me."

"It has been on my mind recently."

"It has?" Her heart fluttered in her chest, creating butterflies in her gut. She hadn't heard those thoughts on him. Dreaming his dream with him scared the crap out of her though. It took her a while to understand that she never before had slept beside a werewolf after mastering the gift. If this was part of the deal—dreaming together—it would take some getting accustomed to.

"There are many things on my mind." It was like he justified why she hadn't heard that one little tidbit from his brain. "The most important thing is that I smell every situation out carefully. I won't make any more mistakes."

"Dimitri." She moved to him before she gave it any thought. His heart thudded hard in his chest when she pressed her palms over it and then stretched her fingers, feeling the hard, raw strength of him warm her hands. "We aren't perfect." She licked her dry lips and watched his dark eyes move to follow the small act. "But you are the best male for me."

"Your mother is right. Taking you out into the pack with my scent so wrapped around you would be dishonorable if you weren't my mate."

"Then make me your mate," she whispered.

"I just did."

She stared at him, his expression so frozen that not one muscle moved. She didn't smell happiness, or fear, or anger—nothing but the rich scent of her sex drifting from his pores.

"What?" she whispered, the one word cracking out of her mouth.

"Isn't that what you want?"

"Is it what you want?"

He exhaled slowly, although his chest remained solid and stretched under her hands. Every muscle in his body seemed harder than steel. "Rosa," he said quietly, seeming so calm that she didn't dare breathe. *I think I'm falling in love with you.*

A squeal escaped her mouth before she could stop it. Even though his expression remained hard, his dark gaze piercing through her, her grin spread across her face until her cheeks hurt.

"That is what I needed to know."

"What?" She didn't understand.

"I just said a few minutes ago that I wouldn't have a mating without love."

"Oh God." She threw her arms around him, jumping on him until he wrapped his arms around her so that she wouldn't fall. "You hardheaded wolf man! You are the most stubborn, bullheaded... Tell me that you love me."

He buried his face in her neck, his lips tickling the sensitive flesh next to her collarbone when he spoke. "I love you, Rosa."

"I love you too," she whispered, respecting his need to keep this moment private and intimate.

Dimitri raised his head, straightening, although still more solid than a large boulder. "Maria," he called for her mother.

Rosa heard the quick footsteps. Dimitri didn't let her go so that she could turn around.

"You have news for an old bitch?" Her mother's excited tone made it sound like she hadn't just demanded that the two of them mate.

Dimitri didn't answer her. Instead, putting Rosa at arm's length, he searched her face without speaking for a moment. Her mouth was too damned dry and her heart raced too quickly in her chest to utter a word.

"You will stay here with your mother until I return for you."

"Where are you going?" Rosa pulled away from him, searching his face.

Dimitri shook his head, forcing himself not to think and turning for the door. "You will stay here," he repeated, and left her den quickly before she could figure out what he was about.

The cold, damp air didn't soothe the growing heat building inside him. As much as a good, hard run would make what he would do now a lot easier, it was best to get it over with. He wouldn't leave Rosa waiting with her mother long. The old bitch would make the best of werewolves rabid.

A few minutes later, he parked his truck in front of Dante Aldo's den. His heart pounded with nervous anticipation, but if he was going to mate, he would do it right. And Dante was the head of her den.

"Son of a bitch," he growled, praying he would be able to pull this off without baring his teeth. He wouldn't belly up, that was for damned sure. But he would honor Rosa and her den by taking her properly.

Although Dante saying no wasn't an option. That much he had the satisfaction of knowing. Dimitri was pack leader.

The door didn't open for him this time as he approached. Dimitri smelled Dante and his bitch inside, and knocked twice, hitting the wood solidly with his fist, then waited. And the male would make him wait. Dimitri didn't doubt for a moment that Dante knew why he was here and what was about to be said.

Kind of made the whole scene a bit of a charade, but nonetheless, traditions would be upheld to the last word, and growl if need be.

It was Moira who opened the door. She studied him a minute with her dark gaze, her expression masked but caution weighing heavily in her scent and the way her lips pressed into a fine line.

"Let him in," Dante said from somewhere inside. There was definite resolution in his tone.

"You know why I'm here." Dimitri wouldn't make a farce out of this.

"What do you think?" Dante sat on his couch, wearing only jeans.

"Kind of makes things easier, then." Dimitri stared down at the werewolf, at that moment deciding it didn't matter what Dante thought of him. Rosa believed in him, and that was enough for Dimitri. "I will take Rosa as my mate."

"Aren't you supposed to ask?" Dante demanded.

"If it strokes your ego." Dimitri shrugged. "I have no problem asking. As pack leader though, the answer is already determined."

Dante growled, moving to his feet. Moira hurried to his side, careful not to touch his arm, which was no longer wrapped. The werewolf held it to his side, as if protecting it. Moira hissed something to him that tickled Dimitri's ears.

When Dante looked down at her, she turned around, standing before her mate and straightening before addressing Dimitri.

"You would honor our den by asking," she said quietly.

Dimitri nodded once. "I am here to request that you give Rosa to me as a mate." He could meet them halfway.

Moira turned around, obviously satisfied with his words, and looked up at her mate. Dante took his time staring at Dimitri. Hiding his thoughts from these two would distract him too much from the situation at hand. Nothing pissed him off more than having his brain explored, but he didn't have anything to hide. They couldn't deny Rosa wanted to be with him and he accepted her with an open heart.

"I sure as hell don't see what Rosa sees in you, but I know she has howled for you for a long time. You will make her very happy by taking her as a mate." Dante spoke slowly, as if the words didn't want to come out of him. "My only concern is whether you really want her."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"If you did, you would have taken her months ago, when she first sniffed after you."

"Mating wasn't the first thing on my mind. Running this pack was. She's helped me see that I would do it better with her at my side."

"So you take her only to make yourself a better pack leader?"

The question was legitimate. Remembering how she smelled when she witnessed the truth of his pain, Dimitri looked away from the male and bitch standing before him, waiting for his answer. Even so, he worried they too caught a glimpse of what Rosa saw earlier that morning. Quickly he stifled the terrible memories. They were personal and private and had nothing to do with this conversation. Only the results of what Rosa showed to him mattered at this juncture.

"Rosa will make me a better pack leader," he admitted. "She will make me a better werewolf. And I do believe right now you and I will agree on one thing. There is no werewolf good enough for Rosa."

"You're right," Moira said quietly. "But I know she loves you. What are your feelings for her?"

Damn the bitch for making him howl his feelings for Rosa to her. Moira was as much a pain in the ass as she was when they were cubs.

Dante growled, obviously crawling around in Dimitri's head, as usual. He would just have to get over it.

"I've shared my feelings with Rosa. She has agreed to be my mate. She is a bitch who deserves the best in every way. All I can give her is me."

A long silence followed. Dante turned away from Dimitri and for a moment looked like he might leave the room. Moira took his uninjured arm, turning him to face her. The two stared at each other, looking like they had a conversation that only the two of them could hear. Dante grumbled, not bothering to form words. But whatever the two of them argued about—and it was clear even without them speaking that they disputed something—he wasn't privy to the conversation. Dimitri decided he didn't care what it was.

"I will announce our mating at a meeting this evening." He turned and reached for the doorknob.

"You will not leave yet." Dante spoke quietly.

The werewolf didn't have the authority to keep Dimitri here. "Oh really," he said without giving much thought to his comment, but then paused when he turned and saw the strain in the male's face.

"There is a werewolf, an American werewolf, who works for Werewolf Affairs."

That got Dimitri's attention. He straightened, crossing his arms. "And?"

"The day we first came to this mountain, he had the power in his paws to prevent us from staying. Things that Moira and I did prior to coming here could have allowed him to give us grief, but he didn't." Dante paused and rubbed his hand over his head, then sighed loudly, his scent changing slightly, turning less hostile. "This pack means as much to me as it does to you. I knew long before the challenge that I wouldn't lead the Malta werewolves, but that doesn't change my desire to see this pack grow and be as powerful as we once were."

Dimitri believed him. He never completely understood why Dante didn't enter the challenge to fight to the death so that one werewolf could lead the pack. But he didn't. Truth be told, it was a move on the werewolf's part that puzzled and relieved Dimitri. It would have been one hell of an ugly fight if Dimitri and he fought for the right to be leader.

"Tell me about this American werewolf."

"Muller. His name is Steve Muller." Dante scowled at the floor for a moment, his unbrushed hair sticking up slightly on one side of his head. "He's been with Werewolf Affairs for many, many years. Close to retiring, I hear."

Dante was going to make him ask twenty questions just to get the simple facts. It was one hell of a strange world sometimes. No one ever would have made him believe he would be part of the den of the male standing before him right now.

"And this werewolf will help us get our funds?" he prompted, shoving the image of wringing Dante's neck to get him to talk faster out of his head.

"I called him this morning." Dante turned away from both of them, moving to the window that stared out at the mountain outside. "We have a right to the same benefits

that Werewolf Affairs offers all packs in this country. Local authorities might not want us here, but they don't have final say. I reminded the werewolf that WA exists to ensure that all packs have a right to unite and hunt, to grow and live the way werewolves were meant to live. That includes schools for our cubs and stores so that we can buy what our dens need. He will help us get funding."

Dimitri stared at him, repeating in his head what Dante just said so that it would sink in. "Thank you," he said finally, accepting that he wouldn't have made such progress on his own.

"I didn't do it for you." Dante's tone was harsh. "Rosa loves you. God only knows why. You reek of anger and bitterness that will only affect the pack over time. Rosa will make an outstanding queen bitch. Her qualities will cover the stench you prowl around with."

Dimitri glared at the werewolf, again fighting the memory of his dream, which surfaced with a vengeance. Dante was the irresponsible one, the one who wasn't there when he was needed. Dimitri's anger was justified. His craving to build the pack into the strong breed of werewolves they once were smelled stronger than any other emotion filtering through him. Nothing the male in front of him said would change his belief on that one.

"I came here because of our traditions. Honoring Rosa by approaching her den for their blessing is as important as making sure this pack always stands strong and fights proud." As much as he ached to, he wouldn't put the werewolf down in his own den.

"You will always honor her." Dante cocked his head, studying Dimitri and obviously walking around freely in his mind.

Dimitri was ready to leave. But for the pack, and only for his pack, he stood tall in front of Dante, reminding himself once again there was nothing in his head that he was ashamed of. "How will this Muller werewolf get us our funding?"

"He called the office here and your paperwork was faxed to him." Dante exhaled, looking away from Dimitri for the first time. It just fucking sucked if the werewolf dug around in Dimitri's brain too far and got a whiff of the memories that tortured Dimitri. Let the werewolf live with the foul stench of his own past errors. Dante didn't look at him when he continued talking. "Once he confirmed the paperwork was in order, he called me back. He should be in touch with you shortly. An agent with Werewolf Affairs will have to visit our pack and confirm your requests are merited."

"I will acknowledge your efforts in helping our pack at our next pack meeting. Which brings me to the one other matter I came here to discuss with you."

"What's that?" Dante frowned.

Good thing to know. Not even Dante Aldo could learn his mind if he kept his thoughts off a certain subject.

Dante's frown deepened.

Dimitri ignored it. "There is something I want to give Rosa at the next pack meeting."

Chapter Fourteen

"I never would have thought I'd see the day." Josie's mischievous grin was beyond annoying.

"Are you okay?" Nicolo didn't help matters much either.

"Fine." Dimitri walked away from both of them, crossing his arms over his chest and watching his pack file into the large warehouse they had recently built for pack meetings.

His pack was taking shape. Almost twenty dens lived on the mountain now. Most of them were Malta werewolves. Less than half of them actually lived on Malta before their pack there was destroyed. Although they were a fourth the size of the pack on Malta, they would grow. He watched the bitches settle into their chairs, many of their bellies bulging with pregnancy. They would grow.

Steve Muller's phone call earlier today couldn't have been timed better. The first check deposited into the pack's checking account was spent within moments of it being there. Granted, they now had this building. Already shipments were confirmed for arrival of much needed supplies for sewage and drain off. The second check was on its way. Weather was finally suitable to start building. In the next few months, his pack would finally have their first store. Several merchants would use the facility to sell a variety of different staple items the pack could use on a regular basis.

With any luck, by next fall they would have a school for their cubs. Dimitri caught himself smiling at the pack as they slowly filled the folding chairs in the large room. He hardened his expression, not needing anyone around him to comment on the idiotic look that must be on his face. And he smelled downright happy. It was an odd scent, clean yet almost musky, like something that hadn't been used in ages just got pulled out from the back of a closet.

Nope. No way would anyone around him say a damned word about his scent. Dimitri forced a scowl.

Dante walked through the doors, holding his mate close to his side. Dimitri met the werewolf's hard gaze and didn't look away. Behind him, Rosa entered with her mother, her face glowing when she leaned around Dante to capture his attention. Her tan eyes glowed like a beach freshly washed with the tide. He held on to her gaze while she sat with her den.

Those werewolves around her were no longer her den. The announcement came tonight. Her mother had thrown a damned fit over waiting almost a month to officially howl to the pack that her daughter was queen bitch, but after the old bitch saw what they had in store for the evening, Dimitri didn't doubt she would forget all about pouting. A slight wave of nerves attacked him, but he held Rosa's gaze, watching while

she loosened her coat and then slipped it off her shoulders. Amazing how staring into her beautiful face helped him stay calm.

Erin slipped into a chair next to Rosa with her mate, Juan, helping her with her coat and then sitting next to her. Dante said something to his mate, and Rosa turned, smiling and laughing. Dimitri looked away. For his mate, he would have to get along with that werewolf. For the life of him, even after everything Dante managed to pull off for the pack, kicking Dante's ass sounded much more appealing. Some old habits just didn't need to die.

A few other dens entered, their mates and cubs trailing around them. The males were Malta werewolves, but their bitches were European mixed. The dens sat close to where Nicolo and Josie's bitches sat. Heidi and Maura introduced themselves to the fairer skinned bitches, and a conversation quickly picked up.

For the most part, his pack was strong and true to the Malta werewolf line. Dark skin and hair dominated the room. But there would be other breeds brought in from time to time. Again he would have to learn to accept the diversity.

Dimitri returned to stand next to Nicolo and Josie as the room slowly filled with his pack.

"Looks like that's about everyone," Josie commented.

"Let's get started." Dimitri moved to the front of the room where a card table was set up. "There will be silence in the room," he yelled. His voice boomed off the wooden walls surrounding them, the rich smell of freshly cut wood mingling with the many emotions filling the room.

His actions grabbed the pack's attention more than his command. Lifting the blood red sash, he draped it over his shoulder and adjusted it so that it hung equally down his front and back. Dwelling on his actions, he put the shocked whispers from his pack out of his head.

"A leader of a pack also leads his den." Dimitri ran his hand down the soft velvet sash, feeling his heart beat steadily under his palm. He met the sober expressions of his pack. "Our traditions are ancient but strong. The blood cloth that I wear tonight shows my willingness to kill, to protect and to provide, not only for my pack, but for my den—and for my mate."

A rush of whispers tickled his ears. His body temperature climbed, the strength of their traditions so strong it brought forth his purer, more carnal nature. Growling at his pack, he silenced them and then lifted a deer hide, especially prepared for this evening's ceremony—a very ancient ceremony that he discussed with Dante almost a month ago. It felt damned good rendering the werewolf speechless and smelling the approval the male couldn't hide quickly enough.

"My mate," he repeated, saying the words and hearing them possibly for the first time brought him pause. Emotions he wasn't ready for crawled forth inside him, almost making him choke on the words.

Rosa stood, pushing her way around her den as she moved to the center aisle. A few gasps, but mostly more whispering took place as she slowly walked toward him. She wore jeans that hugged her thin, muscular legs, and a sweater that revealed her long, narrow neck and then fell nicely over her full breasts and slender figure. Her thick, long black hair fell free down her back, swaying as she moved so that wavy strands curled just above her hips. She didn't look at anyone but him, and the glow in her expression, her rich scent as she approached, somehow made the room around them disappear.

All Dimitri saw was Rosa. And there wasn't a more beautiful bitch on the entire planet. She stopped when she stood before him, her back to the pack and her face raised to his. Her small smile melted his heart, tearing away at so much anger and resentment that he held onto over the years. For a moment he felt lightheaded from the experience.

I love you, he told her in his mind. She mouthed the words to him, blushing so beautifully he almost forgot about the rest of the ceremony.

He would lose himself in her beautiful, pale eyes. "I will kill for you," he announced, handing her the deer hide. He flattened his hand against the red velvet draping half of his torso. "I will fight for you and bleed for you."

Rosa handed the deer hide back to him. "I will kill for you," she said, her voice clear and soft as she recited the ancient words. When she placed her cool hand over his, Dimitri never smelled a sweeter scent than the one that filled the air around them. "I will fight for you and bleed for you."

He wanted to devour her right there, but the ritual initiating her not only into his den, but into the position she would now hold with her pack would be seen out to the end.

Stepping around her, he moved to the small card table and put the hide down and then lifted the small goblet that he had actually found on eBay. But from this moment forward, it would be the ceremonial cup for their pack. They were young and there wasn't anything saved from their old pack to use when they recited their traditions. None of that mattered at the moment. He lifted the small goblet that held the warm blood from the deer killed especially for tonight.

"Drink for me. Take my kill and honor me as I feed you."

Rosa took the cup, leaning her head back and swallowing half of the blood. She licked her moist lips, then handed the cup to him. Dimitri gulped down the remaining blood, feeling it warm his soul as it passed down his esophagus.

Even the cubs stood silently watching. Dimitri took his time looking around the room, taking in the solemn expressions of everyone who watched the timeless tradition that he and Rosa recited in front of them. He actually envied all of them. Not once in his lifetime had he witnessed this ceremony. The bonding of a pack leader and his queen, the sharing of blood for all to see, was a moving experience. Again, weight he didn't realize he carried for so many years seemed to float away from him.

"Malta werewolves," he yelled. "Honor your new queen bitch."

The cheers that followed were deafening. Everyone applauded, cheered and yelled their approval. Then as the clapping slowly died, Maria Anthony pushed her way to the center aisle and slowly approached her daughter. The old woman took her time kneeling in front of Rosa, then took her hand and kissed it. One by one, the rest of the females filed into line, bellying up to their new queen bitch.

"The meat is ready." Josie moved behind him, speaking quietly so as not to interrupt the females. "We had the bitches slice it before the meeting, but there is plenty for everyone."

"Good." Dimitri glanced over to the table that Nicolo worked to set up with his mate's help. "Go help your mate."

Josie nodded, his expression serious as he gripped Dimitri's shoulder. "I'm honored to have just witnessed this ceremony. Excellent idea on your part."

For a moment, Dimitri had no words. He couldn't remember the last time Josie actually praised him. Although the werewolf had his back most of Dimitri's life, Josie's cocky attitude wouldn't have allowed him room for submission or praise. Dimitri grabbed the male's hand, holding it firmly for a moment as he stared into his black eyes. "Your praise honors me."

Josie nodded once, his expression never changing, then slid his hand away from Dimitri's and went to help Maura prepare the plates of deer meat.

A buzz of anticipation ripped through the room when the bitches settled back in their seats. More than likely very few, if any, of the werewolves in the room had witnessed this ceremony before. But probably even the cubs knew what happened next. Every bitch filled her cub's head with the stories that made werewolves the greatest species on earth. Their traditions didn't change. Regardless of their breed, all of them knew the ways of their kind.

Dimitri waited until Nicolo and Josie carried the large platters of sliced meat over to the card table in front of them. The fresh smell of it filled his nose. He placed his hands on Rosa's shoulders, pulling her back against him. The two of them faced their pack, and he cleared his throat, ready to finish the ceremony.

"A wild beast, killed with my claws, torn open with my teeth and bled is our gift to all of you. As we share with each other, we vow to always share with all of you. Together we are united, until death."

Rosa reached for the small knife on the table. Some stories told of the pack leader and his bitch extending their claws, but Dimitri did some research before meeting tonight. Every step of this ceremony would be carried out to the letter. And well into the twentieth-first century, a knife was used now instead of their claws, sterilized to prevent infection.

Rosa didn't hesitate. She raised her hand, her palm facing her pack, and ripped into her flesh with the knife. Her cry of pain made his teeth grow. The sound ransacked his senses. Grabbing her wrist, he took the knife from her and did the same to his hand,

instantly feeling the pain tear at his insides. A collective hiss from those around him showed how much everyone got into their actions.

"We are one," he told Rosa, placing his bleeding hand against hers.

A tear flowed down her cheek, although the smell of her happiness drowned out any smell of pain that he carefully sniffed for. He intertwined his fingers with hers.

"We are one," he told her again, feeling no shame when his voice cracked. "I love you, Rosa Spalto."

She cried out, leaping into his arms very unceremoniously and almost knocking him backward. He couldn't help kissing her. The quick chatter of those around him, mixed with the sounds of Nicolo and Josie moving in quickly to pass the slices of meat around to the pack faded into the background as he held his bitch in his arms.

He prayed death wouldn't come for a very, very long time. Life with his sweet bitch would be too damned perfect to allow it to pass quickly.

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.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by Lorie O'Clare

Cariboo Lunewulf 1: Taming Heather
Cariboo Lunewulf 2: Pursuit
Cariboo Lunewulf 3: Challenged
Dead World
Fallen Gods: Jaded Prey
Fallen Gods: Lotus Blooming
Fallen Gods: Tainted Purity
Fallen Gods: Embracing Temptation
Full Moon Rising
Issue of Trust
Lunewulf 1: Lunewulf Law
Lunewulf 2: In Her Blood
Lunewulf 3: In Her Dreams
Lunewulf 4: In Her Nature
Lunewulf 5: In Her Soul
Penance
Sex Slaves 1: Sex Traders
Sex Slaves 2: Waiting For Yesterday
Sex Slaves 3: Waiting For Dawn
Shara's Challenge
Taking It All
Things That Go Bump in the Night 2004 *anthology*
Torrid Love: After Dusk
Torrid Love: Caught!
Torrid Love: The First Time
Werewolves of Malta 1: Elements Unbound
Werewolves of Malta 2: Living Extinct
Werewolves of Malta 3: Far From Innocent
Werewolves of Malta 4: Forbidden Attraction
Werewolves of Malta 5: For Life



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com