

Chapter 1

Miranda smiled as the cab drove over the Brooklyn Bridge and gazed at Manhattan's skyline. Even in the late afternoon, it was spectacular. Miranda thought nothing beat the view of downtown New York. Some of the oldest and most architecturally inspiring buildings were located here. The city didn't have the majestic vistas the Sangre de Cristo Mountain Range had in New Mexico, but its abundance of skyscrapers was breathtaking.

She could see the tourists hanging out at the South Street Seaport and opened the window to breathe in the myriad of scents that made up New York: the brine of the East River, the various scents of the vendors and restaurants at the Seaport, and of course, the exhaust of all the cars and tourist boats near the pier.

To Miranda, it smelled like home.

After paying the cab driver, she turned around to make sure she was really home. After being gone for nearly two months, it felt strange to be back . . . almost unreal. After unlocking the door and resetting the alarm, she went straight to the kitchen to see if there was anything edible in the fridge. Thank God, there was some fresh orange juice, which she quickly drank. She looked at the stack of mail on the kitchen table and was glad it had all been sorted by Orion, her trusted musician roommate.

Miranda peered up at her ceiling; with the sounds coming from above, Orion was busy entertaining his girlfriend. *No wonder he couldn't pick her up at the airport!* Orion was drop-dead gorgeous with dark hair and a killer smile. Whenever he played the clubs they sold out quickly with a predominance of female fans. Miranda liked his girlfriend Max—short for Maxine. Both were Werens in her best friend's clan.

Another loud groan reverberated throughout the house; the rhythmic banging of a headboard signaled to Miranda it was time to toss in a load of laundry in the basement. She paused when she heard the female's moans; Miranda was pretty sure those sounds weren't Max's.

After tossing in a load of laundry and slowly making her way upstairs, she heard the combined howls of two spent werewolves. A short while later, Orion finally made an appearance wearing only a pair of black jeans that hugged his toned body that screamed, "*Do me.*" And apparently someone just had.

"Hey beautiful." Even after a quick shower, Orion still smelled gloriously of sex. He gave her one of his famous bear hugs that threatened to cut off her air supply, then kissed her on the mouth. "When'd you get in? I thought you weren't supposed to be back until tonight." He grabbed the carton of orange juice and took a few swallows while Miranda gave him the evil eye.

Orion grinned at her. "Yeah, yeah, I know, no drinking from the carton, but I'm running late." He gave her one last hug and this time kissed her cheek. "Welcome home, Miranda. I missed you. There's food in the freezer. From Amna's—your favorite Mediterranean diner. Chicken kebobs with rice and veggies." He raised his eyebrows up and down fast. "There's even baklava—with pistachios—no walnuts. Your favorite."

Miranda adored her roommate and if she could ever wish for a brother, Orion would be it. With his boyish good looks, he was sinfully handsome. "Well, I'm glad to see the house is still in good shape." Miranda glimpsed the ceiling. "Anything I need to know before you rush off?"

Orion ran both hands through his damp hair, giving her a good view of his six pack. Like all Weres, he liked to flirt, even though their relationship had always been platonic. Weres had different notions about sex; they simply didn't have the hang-ups humans had about nudity and the first few months after he had moved in she had to constantly remind him not to walk naked around the house.

"I left your messages by your bed. Mail's sorted out." Glancing at the ceiling, he seemed to hesitate. "Lizandra said she wanted you to call her as soon as you got in." He pulled his t-shirt over his head and tucked it into his jeans. Then he pulled his baseball cap down low. "We'll talk later, okay?"

Miranda shrugged. "Okay." She sensed something was wrong.

As Orion was reaching for the door, he stopped and turned back to her. “Valadon stopped by. He asked a lot of questions about when you were returning.” Orion grabbed his keys and sunglasses from the bowl on the table near the door.

Miranda leaned against the archway with her arms casually folded against her chest. “What did you tell him?”

Orion lifted a shoulder. “What you told me to tell him. Nothing else.”

“Good.” Miranda knew how persistent Valadon was and wasn’t surprised by his stopping by. Her privacy didn’t seem to be on his list of priorities.

Orion was halfway out the door when he turned back. “Oh yeah, the other vampire stopped by too.”

“Who?” Gabriel, her former lover, immediately came to mind. But they had been over for months now.

“Remare.” Orion put on his sunglasses. “He asked about you too. Said he just wanted to check the alarm system.”

Miranda’s body became rigid at the mention of Remare’s name. Months ago, they had gotten close—too close, and he had been one of the reasons she had taken the assignment in New Mexico, even if they had reached a mutual understanding. Jerk had programmed a ridiculous password for the alarm that she had yet to figure out how to reset. “Did you ask him to change the password?”

“Sorry.” Orion gritted his teeth like he just remembered. “I forgot.”

“Go.” She joined him by the door. “I’ll check my calls.”

“Miranda.” He hesitated again. “I’m really glad you’re back.”

“Me too.”

“I kinda broke up with Max.” He winced as if ready for an argument.

Miranda glanced upstairs. “Really?”

“Yeah. Don’t be mad, okay?” He ran another hand through his hair.

“It’s your life, not mine.” With the way her love life had turned out, Miranda thought she was the last one to criticize anyone else’s love life. “So who’s the new hottie?”

“I think I’ll let her tell you.” He quickly glanced up at the stairs. “I gotta run. See you later tonight, okay?”

“Sure.”

Orion kissed the top of her head and was gone before she could ask him anymore questions.

Well, that was strange. Miranda closed the door and wondered who the new girl was, but decided the mail and phone messages needed her attention more. Returning the orange juice to the fridge, a familiar scent entered the kitchen—a scent she knew almost as well as her own.

“Welcome back, girlfriend. We were going to have a welcome home party for you . . . but decided to celebrate a little early.”

Miranda grinned. She’d recognize the throaty purr if she were deaf. She turned to see her best friend, Lizandra, the Were Queen. At nearly six feet tall, even without the three inch stiletto boots, and dressed in a sleeveless, bronze jumpsuit that showed off every curve and well-toned muscle, Lizandra stood against the archway and raised an eyebrow. “Welcome home, Mira.”

Miranda hugged her as thoroughly as Orion had embraced her. Pack mentality was if you were pack, you were family and pack members embraced their own. And as *Friend to the Clan*, she felt cherished. “It’s good to see you.” Miranda inhaled Liz’s scent and then let her go. “I’ve missed you.” She looked back at the archway. “Seriously? Orion? What the hell happened with Gavin?”

Lizandra circled the kitchen table taking her time to respond. “Oh, pretty much the same as you and Gabriel,” she said as she looked at Miranda. “Just not as extreme.”

“Not as extreme, huh?” Miranda nodded above. “You had my ceiling vibrating.”

“Hey, I’m Were Queen.” Liz thrust her long, black braids behind her back. Her café mocha skin glistening, she placed her long manicured fingernails on the table and smiled deviously. “I can have whoever I want.”

“And did!” Miranda sat as Liz joined her. “I didn’t know Orion was one of your favorites.”

“He wasn’t. But, I wanted something different.” Relaxing, Liz crossed one long leg over the other. “So. Tell me about New Mexico.” She raised one eyebrow. “I hear you did *something* different too.”

Miranda rolled her eyes and then told her about Will and her dream. “But the deal is . . .” Miranda shook her head. “It felt *real*. Like I was actually flying.”

Liz watched her with her arms crossed over her chest. “I should think you’d be more careful with your drinks.” She raised both eyebrows this time. “You, of all people, should know better. Someone must have slipped you a powerful hallucinogen.”

Miranda looked at her. Fragments of nightmares long buried surfaced and she quickly slammed the door on memories better left dead. After a while, she murmured, “So there’s no way it was real?” Miranda met her friend’s eyes. “But I felt it—I felt the wind on my face and saw the tops of the mountains, I looked down on them!”

Liz leaned forward and took both of Miranda’s hands. “Listen to me. There is no way they turned you into an eagle. Weres only become Weres if we’re born this way. It’s not something that can be transmitted from one person to another or the whole damned world would be populated with Weres.”

Miranda’s shoulders relaxed. “You must think I am the biggest idiot on the planet.”

“Hardly.” Liz rose and walked around the kitchen. “This place is too small. Come to Werehaven and we’ll talk more.”

“I can’t. I’ve got laundry to do and mail to sort through.” Miranda watched as Liz raised two eyebrows and slowly gave her the look that said, “*I wasn’t asking—I was telling you.*”

“Fine.” Miranda relented. “But it will have to be later.”

“That’s fine. Just make sure you get your well-used ass there later tonight.”

Miranda smirked. “*My* well-used ass? I think your ass got used more than mine from all the moaning I heard.”

“Orion is very . . . tasty.” Liz gave Miranda her most devious smile as she played with one of her braids. “You would know that if you nibbled more.”

“I don’t nibble on roommates.” Miranda wagged her index finger. “You lose them that way.”

“Speaking of nibbles . . . your former employer has deigned to enter my stronghold. He’s been trying to get a hold of you.”

“Yes. I know.” Miranda didn’t bother to tell Liz about Valadon’s mental link and what he had interrupted. “I’ll call him.” When Lizandra glared at her, Miranda said, “I promise.”

“See that you do.” Liz hooked her bag over her shoulder and opened the front door, then said in her mock Caribbean accent, “da man get very peckish . . . when he don’t get his way.”

“Peckish, my ass,” Miranda grumbled as she eyed the phone. But perhaps this was one conversation she needed to have in person. It had been months since she’d seen the vampire high lord and she could still remember how it felt when she had been in his arms. He had haunted her dreams for months after she left ValCorp. Maybe he was over her by now, but from the enraged

scream she heard thundering in her mind when she let him glimpse her with Will, she didn't think so. It was probably not the smartest idea to let him see her in the throes of passion with another man. She was entitled to her privacy, she thought . . . wasn't she?

* * *

In the penthouse suite of ValCorp, Remare relaxed on the sofa and read his text message. "It seems Professor Crescent has arrived safe and sound from her trip."

"About time," Valadon murmured.

"And you still think it wise to involve her in our business abroad?" Remare casually uncrossed one leg from the other, not certain at all about involving a human in vampire affairs, even if that human had extraordinary talents. And Miranda's gifts were exceptional. Remare remembered the last time she had used her powers against him and felt himself growing hard.

"Who else can I send?" Valadon bellowed as he gestured with his open hands. "Vivienna knows all of our people; our most trusted people. She seduced the last two I sent and we wound up with nothing. I want someone we can trust impeccably. Someone Vivienna has no power over . . . someone she can't seduce." Valadon turned to face his second. "I would send you," he smirked, "but the two of you would wind up killing each other."

Remare smiled at the thought. Valadon was half-right: He would succeed in killing Vivienna, though she would have no chance at ending his life. He valued his existence too dearly to let the scheming vixen end it. Unfortunately, Vivienna was the adopted niece of Caltrone, a high-ranking member of the Vampire High Council—the council that ruled all vampires for which Vivienna worked. If he did kill Vivienna, they would lose valuable allies in the high court they couldn't afford to relinquish.

He read another text message. "Miranda's now at Werhaven. Shall I fetch her for you?" The more Remare thought about it, the more intrigued he became at the thought. He would see to it she was protected, of course. But if she could pull this off . . . ah, the possibilities.

Valadon stared down at the city below him. "I've spent centuries building up ValCorp and now rumors persist the High Council is interested in *my* corporation—as if they could take it from me. I'll never let that happen." He turned to face Remare. "Bring her to me."

"With pleasure," Remare said as he rose.

Chapter 2

“Really Caltrone, with all the finer places in Paris to meet, I would think you could have found some place better than the damned Catacombs,” Vivienna, Madam Lord of Paris, bristled at her sometime lover and companion as she followed the stairs that led far below the darkened Catacombs.

“Yes, of course.” Caltrone ran his eyes over Vivienna’s chic, dark suit and killer heels. He’d advised her to dress accordingly, but as head of one of the top fashion houses in Paris, Vivienna always dressed elegantly with fine attention given to every detail of her appearance. Even with the high heels, Vivienna could walk silently on the stone floor, a skill she shared with other Blueblood vampires. He admired her aristocratic beauty as well as her cunning and had seen to it that she was made Madam Lord nearly a century ago. Even though she was one of the most powerful vampires in the city, he was Council—older and more powerful.

He used his electronic key card to open the heavy metal door and waited until Vivienna entered and then locked the door behind him. “But here,” he gestured around the vast subterranean room with a conference table in its center, “there is no chance of being monitored. The Elders had a reason for using this place, however dismal. Our conversations are completely secure and what we are about to discuss will *not* leave this room.” He eyed all of the vampires present.

“We’re all here for the same reason.” Tobias finished pouring himself a glass of bloodwine and then took a seat at the long table. Tobias was a businessman whose accumulation of wealth knew no bounds, but it was the vampire sitting next to him who posed a greater threat.

“I agree the setting leaves much to be desired, but will suffice for now.” Merlinder nodded in agreement. He was as calculating as he was intelligent, reserving his opinions until he was satisfied that those around him had made their intentions known first. Caltrone was wary of him;

if there was anyone who could challenge him and had the slightest chance of winning, it was Merlinder, and therefore, he was carefully watched.

Caltrone escorted Vivienne to her seat at the end of the table, then walked to his seat at the head of the table. “Yes. It seems Valadon has already intercepted one of our transmissions.” He gazed in the direction of one of his strongest allies. Gizette was as beautiful as she was deadly with her fall of blond hair and pale complexion. Although petite, no one present at the table was fool enough to doubt her powers or that she enjoyed using her gifts in the most ingenious ways. He smirked. “I believe Gizette has handled that bit of inconvenience.”

Gizette nodded with a hint of cruelty. “There will be no other communique from my end. Or they will wind up as Emil did.” She clicked the remote and a video appeared on the large screen. They watched silently as Emil was staked to the ground. One of his executioners took a long blade and removed his entrails as Emil screamed in terror. As his body thrashed about, liquid silver was poured into his empty cavity. After Emil’s bloodcurdling screams had died as well as the vampire, the body was torched. Satisfied, Gizette clicked the video off.

No one present felt any sympathy for the traitor.

Vivienne glared across the table at Gizette. “Had you control of your courtiers, this meeting would not be necessary.”

Gizette hissed her reply. “And you think *all* your people are loyal, Vivienne? Valadon’s arm is long and strong. His wealth buys many tongues.”

“And has Valadon bought yours, Gizette?” Vivienne smirked as her lavender eyes glowed. “I seem to remember you having a fondness for our former Minister of Finance.”

Gizette rose in indignation. “I am loyal to the High Court, as I’ve always been. No one here *dares* questions my allegiance.”

Caltrone watched the interplay between the two powerful female vampires and knew the situation could easily escalate. “No one here questions your dedication to the VHC’s directive.” He watched the ice forming in Vivienne’s eyes turning them a darker shade of purple. With her mane of raven hair and fair complexion, she was truly one of the world’s most beautiful women. He knew from long ago when she gave the illusion of being serene, she was at her most dangerous state. Her lack of sentimentality had helped forge their alliance long ago. “But with our failing economy and the value of the Euro dropping, it is prudent we take steps now to avoid any further financial calamity.”

“My wineries continue to produce a substantial profit and my donations to the High Court and our ruling council remain steadfast.” Gizette glared at Vivienna as she sat. “Can everyone here make the same claim?”

Caltrone understood the bitterness between the two women, but chose to ignore it. However, he wasn’t so sure Vivienna would allow such a slight to go unanswered.

“Paris has always been the world’s leader in fashion and continues to be. As with any business,” Vivienna bit into a peach she had taken from the assortment of fruit laid out on the table, her fangs fully elongated, “some years are more fruitful than others.”

“The fashion and wine industries continue to be profitable, but some of us have not had the good fortune you have enjoyed.” Calisar, the oldest, but not the most powerful of the vampires seated at the table, turned to Caltrone. “We look now to the High Council for guidance.”

“And that is precisely why we are here.” Caltrone leaned back and observed those present. Syrio would soon be stepping down as chancellor of their council and Caltrone planned on being his successor. But for that he needed the support of all the vampires present. And that took not only political influence, but a great deal of money. “Syrio has had no answers. We’ve poured money into the failing economies of our southern regions without significant improvement.” His eyes focused on Vivienna. “We need Valadon back.”

“He will never come back to Europe,” Merlinder huffed. “His empire in America is strong and he no longer has the loyalty he once did to our courts.”

“It is true we cannot force him to return.” Caltrone looked approvingly at Vivienna. “But I’ve always found persuasion a more viable choice.”

Vivienna smiled devilishly as her well-manicured fingers stroked her arms. “Valadon has had few weaknesses over the long years he’s been away. I suggest we dig deeper into his personal life . . . and find one.”

Caltrone listened to the whispered thoughts of those around him and smiled. Soon it would be time to set his plans in motion. Mulciber had been a powerful ally—the ancient’s death unfortunate, but his mole at ValCorp was still loyal to the council . . . and as a senior member of the council—to him. No one at the table knew that, not even Vivienna and he planned to keep it that way.

Merlinder asked, “How do you plan to lure Valadon to our shores? He’s not deigned to visit us in centuries. Why would he come now?”

Vivienna serenely smiled. “Every man has at least one weakness, Merlinder.”

“In that regard, I may be of some assistance.” Isabelle, the youngest member of their group offered. “My brother, Bastien, has informed my parents he will soon be coming for a visit. If anyone knows of a weakness of Valadon, surely one of his elite Torians will be aware of it.”

Caltrone leaned back in his chair and smiled. “Well done, Isabelle, well done.”

Vivienna smiled at Isabelle. “Do tell.”

Caltrone knew Vivienna was like a lion—a predator patient enough to learn her prey’s vulnerability. She was shrewd enough to wait until she uncovered whatever information she needed to wage an attack. And she would attack, there was too much at risk not to. Her cunning could be lethal under any circumstances. He knew because he’d been the one to train her as an agent of the VHC; she had been one of his best operatives.

But Vivienna also had a vulnerability and he knew exactly what that was if she should ever set her sights too high.

Chapter 3

Not far from the Museum of Natural History, burrowed deep below Central Park, Werehaven was Black Star Clan's dance club and sanctuary. To Miranda, it was her home away from home. Or at least it had been, she sighed. Arranging her messenger bag high on her shoulder, she exhaled. "I've got gifts to be given and friends to greet." She carefully took the spiral steps downward that led to Lizandra's private playground. Striding past the curved, long bar encompassing the sunken dance floor, she made her way to the VIP lounge.

Miranda missed being there. After the tragedy of the death of one of their own, she didn't think she would be welcome. Even though Lizandra emphatically denied any Weres in her clan held her responsible for his death, Miranda knew the truth: Dane would never have been murdered if she hadn't asked him to research Valadon's enemies. The fact that several members of the HOL also lost their lives did little to assuage her feelings of guilt.

As she walked past the bar, most of the Weres nodded or tipped their drinks in her direction. When she climbed the few steps to the lounge, Brent, Black Star's chief accountant and his lover, Quint, the clan's top legal counselor were relaxing on the couch as they spoke with the Were Queen. Closing the door behind her, Miranda said, "I see the glass partition works fine."

Liz rose from her leather recliner. "Yes, since we seem to hold more of our meetings here rather than in my rooms, it was best to soundproof the lounge." She hugged Miranda. "Come sit."

A waitress came and took her drink order. "Cranberry juice," Miranda said, knowing Lizandra still watched how much she drank. Last winter she may have drunk a bit too much when her nightmares were at their worst, but she had dealt with her issues—mostly.

"You know you can only stay until ten, right?" Liz asked as she eyed her friend.

“Ah, it’s still the full moon.” Placing her messenger bag down, Miranda sat on the couch facing Brent and Quint. At midnight all the Weres would change into their wolf form and traverse the park in their Lunar Run. It was no time for humans to be anywhere in the vicinity.

Brent looked up. “Haven’t seen you around for a while.” He rose to give Miranda a kiss on the cheek. “Welcome back. We missed you.”

Quint nudged her boot with the toe of his shoe and smiled at her. “Yeah! It’s about time you showed your face. We were afraid some sexy beast out West captured your heart and you decided to relocate.”

“Never happen.” Miranda shook her head. “New York’s home and always will be.”

“Chic boots you’re wearing,” Liz teased.

Miranda saw Liz admiring her sleek black suede boots. Ever since she had been burned on her lower legs by an evil vampire, Miranda had worn leather boots almost constantly in the cooler months. Tonight, with the tight black jeans and the black leather-look top that revealed her tanned and toned arms, Miranda looked like a warrior. “Like them? I thought they were kind of kinky myself.” Miranda reached inside her bag and handed out gifts to the Were Queen and her other friends.

Liz unwrapped a pair of coral and silver earrings. “Oooh! These will go smashing with the new outfit I got. Thank you.”

Brent said, “Look, I got a brown leather bound book with my name engraved on the cover.”

Miranda smiled at the dark haired Were. “Something to go with all your electronic toys.”

Quint, chief counselor to the clan said, “Sweet, it’s an engraved money clip. I could use this for my various papers.”

“Half the fun of going on trips is shopping for you guys.” She’d also bought gifts for Tia, Liz’s second, and her friends Max and Gavin. “I brought a few things for the others. Will you see that they get them?” Miranda asked as she took out a few similar wrapped gifts with her friends names printed on them and laid them out on the coffee table.”

“Of course.”

When Liz widened her eyes to Brent and Quint; they got the message it was time to leave. They echoed their thanks. Quint playfully nipped her ear. “Don’t stay away so long next time.”

The waitress arrived with Miranda’s drink and then left closing the door behind her.

Liz watched as Miranda sipped her drink. “Did you call Valadon?”

Miranda rose and went to the huge tinted window to watch the crowd dancing down on the dance floor. "I'm going to ValCorp after I leave here." She crossed both arms over her chest. "I'll see what he wants then."

"Good." Liz stood beside her and watched her people dancing below. Mirroring Miranda's pose, she asked, "Have the nightmares stopped?"

"Not completely." Miranda didn't lie to her friend. What would be the point? Liz could smell a lie a mile away. She glanced at Liz. "But they have lessened considerably." She used to think the horrid images of how Dane was tortured before he died were the worst. But she'd been wrong. It was when she dreamed he was still alive and having a casual conversation with him, seeing him smiling, that haunted her most. Then, when the harsh light of reality hit her like an anvil that he was truly dead, she experienced the same sense of loss, yet again.

Like a mama bear watching over her cubs, Liz continued watching her people dancing. "How not completely?"

"I'm not drinking as much as I used to." Miranda faced her friend. "So you don't have to worry every time I take a drink. Liquor was never my choice of poison anyway."

"Never?" Liz raised one eyebrow.

Miranda returned her look. "I'm not a kid anymore and childish lunacies have long since lost their appeal."

"Good to hear." Liz continued to watch the crowd. "Then maybe you'll start to hang out with your friends who love you."

"How could they love me? Miranda's voice sounded gravelly, even to her.

"I have told you repeatedly it wasn't your fault."

Miranda exhaled. Months ago, Gabriel had visited Lizandra and told her about her nightmares. It was one of the reasons for the breakup.

"Do you know how much effort the whole clan put into your welcome home party?"

Frowning, Miranda looked around the club. No evidence of any planning was anywhere in sight.

"Not here, you idiot." Liz threw her hands in the air. "We figured you would need time to rest, and it's still too close to the full moon so we planned it for next weekend so don't make any plans."

Miranda was humored by the gesture. "You're giving me a party?"

“Yes, it was Max’s idea actually, but everyone, agreed that a party was in order so see that your white round ass shows up next weekend.”

Miranda smiled. “I will.” When the silence stretched on Miranda could sense something else was troubling her friend and noticed more enforcers than usual scattered throughout the club. “Now you mind telling me what’s going on with all the extra security?”

“We’ve had a few altercations with Red Claw.”

Red Claw was a rival clan that claimed Riverside Park as their territory, but wanted hunting rights in Central Park as well. Their pack master, Edgar Renworth, sought to infringe on Lizandra’s territory, but the lawyers had fought it out in court with the decision in favor of Black Star. Quint was a terrific lawyer and one hell of a litigator as the Red Claws soon found out.

“You told me you won the case against Red Claw.”

“We did.” Lizandra slowly exhaled. “But that hasn’t stopped the more hostile members from trying to trespass. Some of the incidents have turned . . . bloody.”

Christ! No wonder Lizandra looked so grim. “How bloody?”

“We’ve suffered a few injuries.” Liz continued watching over her people. “But so has Red Claw.”

Miranda eyed her friend. “You expect more retaliation. Don’t you?”

“I expect things will get far worse before they get better.” She turned to look at Miranda and gestured to the bar area. “See that blond waitress. She’s new . . . and I suspect a plant from Red Claw.”

Miranda eyed the short haired girl. “Is she now? And what are you doing about it?”

“Nothing for now. She is not privy to my conversations and I only let her hear what I want her to hear. Can you read her? With that gift you have?”

Miranda knew she was referring to her empath skills. “I’ll have to get closer. Touching her would be best, but remember I only read emotions, not thoughts.”

“Right now, that’s enough. Why don’t you go mingle in the bar area. We’ll talk again soon. There are things I need to discuss with David and Sam.”

Miranda looked to see Lizandra’s brothers entering the lounge. If ever brothers looked so unlike it was Sam and David. Like Liz, both had mocha colored skin and green eyes, but David—the older of the two, had long dreadlocks that went halfway down his back. He was muscularly built with biceps and triceps accentuated by his black muscle shirt and . . . he made

the best BBQ this side of the Mississippi River. At six foot-six, David was an imposing figure, until he smiled and then became one of the most amicable people she'd ever met.

Sam, her younger brother, was shorter, a lieutenant in the NYPD and kept his hair regulation short. Not as friendly as David, he kept to himself and didn't hang out at Werhaven as much as David did.

Lizandra confided in her concerning many aspects of Were culture, but there were events and meetings she had never been invited to and never would be. Liz had simply stated, *Were business*, and that was the only explanation Miranda ever needed. She kissed Liz's cheek and simply whispered, "I'll be in touch."

Miranda made her way to the bar area and spotted one of her favorite Weres, Max, at one of the high round tables by the balcony. "Hey there, Max."

Max's entire face lit up. "Miranda, you're back!" Her hair was black with silver stripes; her nails were painted the same colors. Barely twenty-one, she still had her youthful enthusiasm and the face of a pixie. She lunged out of her chair to give Miranda a tight hug that Miranda thought might actually leave bruises.

Miranda laughed. "Hey, I'm glad to see you too!"

"When did you get back?" Max asked in rushed tones.

"Just today." She was careful not to mention Orion's aerobic workout session with Lizandra. "I've missed you. How've you been?"

"I'm getting by." She looked downcast. "I suppose you heard."

"Yeah, I'm so sorry, Max." Breakups were tough even when the parties involved considered it mutual. But Max was young and very pretty. Miranda was sure in time Max would find someone else. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Not really. But tell me about New Mexico." Max's exuberance had her bouncing in her chair. "You made it sound so wonderful in your texts."

"It was. It really was . . . enchanting." Miranda was *not* going to bring up her flying adventure. "I brought you back a little something, but I left it on the coffee table in the lounge. Lizandra said she would get it to you."

Max made a face a child would make if Brussels sprouts were being served for dinner. Miranda tried not to laugh, but failed. "Ah, Max . . . you know she is the queen."

"Grumble, grumble," was all Max said. "I know she is and I love her too, but . . ."

Miranda didn't know what else to say so she let the silence stretch out.

"I thought I had it bad," Max munched on a pretzel, then said, "but have you seen Gavin since you got back? He was really upset with Lizandra for a long time. He got real quiet and wouldn't talk to anyone for a while."

Miranda exhaled. These were her friends and they had suffered, yet she had neglected them. That was about to change. "Max. Just how much trouble has Red Claw been giving Lizandra?"

The Brussels sprout look was back. "I'm not supposed to talk about it. Were business."

"Max, I'm her friend. I know I've been away for a while, but you're all the family I have. Tell me what I need to know."

Max gradually let go of her veggie look. "There've been a few skirmishes." She started playing with her hair again. "Lawe got cut bad across his side, but Liz stitched him up. Mostly, they've been testing us. Liz says they're studying the way we fight. Picking disputes just so they can watch us."

A familiar scent hovered in the air: Gavin, aka the red wolf—Lizandra's ex. In a voice that sounded like music, he asked, "How are my favorite two females doing tonight?"

Weres were known for being affectionate and Gavin was no exception. He ran his hand across Max's back and kissed her temple. When he turned to Miranda he held her eyes for a moment and then hugged her tightly, not letting go until Miranda did. He kissed her as well, but on the lips as a *fuck you* to Lizandra, apparently not caring if she saw or not.

Miranda bet he did care. "Gavin, it's good to see you, too"

Max said, "Miranda just got back from out west."

"I heard you went away for a while." He cocked his head. "How was your trip?"

Before Miranda could answer, Sasha appeared and stood beside Max. The former Red Claw had been horribly mistreated in her own clan until Lizandra had adopted her. "Hi Sasha, you look great." Dressed in a black miniskirt and blue blouse she looked radiant.

"Welcome home, Miranda," she said quietly.

"We gotta get ready for later tonight." Max said as she gathered up her purse and downed her drink. "Come around more often, okay?"

"Sure." Miranda hugged her goodbye and waved to Sasha, who was still the only Were who didn't touch as freely as the others.

Alone with Gavin, Miranda found it hard to believe Liz had walked away from him. He was gorgeous with his mane of reddish-brown hair, bourbon-colored eyes and constant tan. Of all the Weres, his muscular built was the strongest. Miranda considered him a good friend and thought he and Lizandra made a great couple. Goes to show, you can't always tell, she thought.

"I'm glad you finally deigned to honor us with your presence." He smiled as he tipped his beer bottle at her.

"Okay, okay. Everyone's gotten on my case about it." Miranda downed her drink. "If I promise to show up more often, will you drop it?"

"Of course. I'm just glad to see you . . . or did the kiss not register?" he grinned.

"Oh, it registered." She patted the seat vacated by Max. "Sit, maybe you could tell me what's been going on around here since I've been gone."

Gavin gazed up at the lounge. "I'm sure Liz has already informed you."

Miranda leaned back in her chair. "To a degree."

"That's Liz for you. She keeps her cards to herself." He tipped his bottle in her direction and drank another gulp of his beer. "With good reason."

When the silence dragged on, Miranda figured that was all she was going to get.

"Red Claw's been testing the boundaries." Gavin sat back. "They want to see where our strengths and weaknesses are."

Miranda grew pensive. "That doesn't sound good."

Gavin paused in scanning the crowd and just looked at her. "It's not."

Miranda turned to see where Gavin had been looking. "What do you think of the new waitress?"

"I'm not sure." He swallowed his beer. "Some people are harder to get a bead on than others." After another lengthy silence, Gavin asked, "How was your trip?"

"Fascinating." Miranda gave a brief account of her studies. "So, if there are Were eagles and Were wolves . . . what else is there?"

Gavin laughed. "Miranda. With all that you've seen in the last few years, you still have to ask that question?"

Miranda didn't see the humor in the question. When the silence lasted longer than she thought it would, she grumbled, "Fine, don't answer."

Gavin grinned. “Miranda, there are *many* wondrous beings that walk this world.” He tilted his beer until she looked around the club and spotted an elegantly dressed vampire making his way to them. “One just walked in.”

Miranda caught a whiff of a woodland scent and swore her enhanced sense of smell came from hanging out with the Weres. Despite her desire to contain her reaction, her body instantly shivered; she knew only one vampire who smelled like the forest: Remare.

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