

## Chapter 17 Unfamiliar Territory

Before I left the gallery on my assignment, Molly had given me a deadline. I had a week to get Noah Cunningham to agree to an exhibit. If I didn't, I had no doubt that she would use my failure as an excuse to fire me, even if it would make Arthur unhappy.

Since I didn't have a car of my own, I had to take the bus to get to Cunningham's estate. It took way longer than expected and I worried how Arthur would react if I came home so late. It's not that he had given me a curfew or anything, but still...

If he's angry, tell him to buy you a car. I'm honestly surprised he hasn't already, Lily suggested and I balked. I could never make such a demand from him. That would be too much considering all he had done already.

You're potentially having his baby. No demand is too much, Lily argued, but I ignored her, focusing instead on the large house that was looming over me. The gothic architecture made it stand out. None of the other houses in the area looked anything like this.

With my pulse rising higher with every step that I took, I stopped at the door. Now that I was here, I wasn't really sure what to do or say. My entire career at the gallery hinged on this man's acceptance.

Just ring the damn doorbell, Lily snapped and her impatience snapped me out of my nervousness. The sooner I did this, the sooner I could get home. It had been a long day, physically and emotionally.

I rang the doorbell and the peals sounded ominous, but I was pretty sure that had more to do with my nerves than any actual doom and gloom that surrounded the house.

No answer. I waited for a minute before ringing the doorbell again. There was still no answer. Perhaps he wasn't home. Or he was ignoring me.

No matter. I had brought art supplies just in case this happened. I walked off the porch and set up the travel easel in the yard so I could see all the landscape that the view had to offer. And boy what a view it was.

Cunningham's house was set on a hill and the sunset was making everything exceptionally beautiful. The distant mountains were a purple, protective wall sheltering the vast forests. It was easy to picture unicorns and the like existing within those trees.

Time went by quickly as I painted and painted. It wasn't until I could barely see the canvas in front of me that I finally noticed how far the sun had set. Cunningham had never shown up or come out.

As I was packing away my belongings, I suddenly had the feeling of being watched. I continued to pack while the spot between my shoulders burned and the hair at the nape of my neck stood up. I was definitely being watched.

Lily's hackles rose, but I managed to calm her down. If someone were going to hurt us, they would have done so already. They had plenty of opportunities.

When I was finished, I looked up at the house and caught sight of someone standing in one of the upstairs windows. Ah. There was the lurker.

From what I could see, they had long hair, pale skin, and a lean body. I wasn't sure, but I thought maybe it was a woman. Perhaps Cunningham's wife? I didn't know if he was married, but not much was known about the man.

I allowed my eyes to change from their usual color to Lily's bright amber. While I could see more than a regular human, I would be able to have a clearer picture with wolf eyes.

The person in the window was staying closer to the shadows so while I couldn't make out specific features like the color of their eyes or hair, I could see the feminine beauty.

High cheekbones, a slender nose and full pouty lips. Even from here I could tell that she was an absolute stunner. Perhaps if I were more inclined to members of the female persuasion, I'd be attracted to her. I could still appreciate her looks, though.

"Hello," I called. "My name is Almara. I'm from Molly Whitmore's art gallery. I was wondering if I could speak to Noah Cunningham, Miss..." I trailed off, leaving her an opening to introduce herself.

I was met with an awkward silence. The woman at the window did nothing to say she acknowledged I was there. I could still feel her watching me. The window was open too so I knew she could hear me.

With a sudden thud, the window slammed down and the woman disappeared. Obviously I had offended her in some way, but I was at a loss as to how. I had been downright pleasant with her. Maybe I'd trespassed for too long on the property, but she could have shooed me away at any time.

Whatever. I'd be back tomorrow anyway. If at first you don't succeed, try and try again. It was all I could do.

The trip back home was long, but uneventful. However, I didn't get back to Arthur's house until after nine o'clock. I really hoped he wouldn't be upset. It wasn't my fault that I had to wait on public transportation or that he had a woman friend who wanted to make my life miserable.

As I crept around the house, not wanting to disturb anyone, I caught the faintest whiff of alcohol. I paused. Was Arthur drinking? And if I could pick up the scent from here, how much had he been drinking?

Anxiety curled in my stomach. I didn't have any good experience when it came to the men in my life drinking. Robert had always become a different person whenever alcohol touched his lips.

He would do and say things that I'd swept under the rug, but was now making me question why I had ever stayed with him. On several occasions, he'd told me how worthless I was and had even slapped me across the face a couple of times. Had my dreams of a perfect marriage and life really blinded me that much?

Yes, came Lily's scathing reply. Shame coursed through my body. And here I was yet again with a man that didn't really like me most of the time. What was I doing here?

Arthur is nothing like Robert. Just go to him, Lily demanded and I sighed. I didn't want to fight with her tonight even if I was tired. All I wanted was to slip into bed and fall asleep.

But she was right. Arthur had his moments of cold indifference, but he had never said anything negative about me. He had never raised a hand against me. In fact, most of the things he did usually involved pleasure of some sort, whether it was giving her her dream job or kissing her senseless.

I followed the scent trail to Arthur's study. He was just on the other side of the door. There was really only one way to find out what kind of man Arthur was while drinking. Taking a deep breath, I gathered my courage and walked inside.